

POLTERGEIST

A novel by
James Kahn
Based on a story
by
Steven Spielberg

With a screenplay by
Steven Spielberg,
Michael Grais & Mark Victor

Now an M-G-M film

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FROM A DIMENSION BEYOND THE LIVING,
A TERROR TO SCARE YOU TO DEATH

POLTERGEIST

From the imageless eye of the TV set, from the flickering snowy light, it calls to Carol Anne, six years old and innocent.

From beyond the world of the living, it reaches out in unholy anger, ripping her from the arms of her family into the thrall of the POLTERGEIST.

METRO-GOLDWYN-MAYER Presents
A TOBE HOOPER Film
A STEVEN SPIELBERG Production

POLTERGEIST

JOBETH WILLIAMS • CRAIG T. NELSON
BEATRICE STRAIGHT
Music by **JERRY GOLDSMITH**
Story by **STEVEN SPIELBERG**
Screenplay by **STEVEN SPIELBERG,**
MICHAEL GRAIS & **MARK VICTOR**
Directed by **TOBE HOOPER**
Produced by **STEVEN SPIELBERG** and
FRANK MARSHALL



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POLTERGEIST: *"A mischievous entity that makes noises, throws objects, causes fires . . . usually occurs in the immediate vicinity of some young person. It is as if this person is haunted or persecuted by some spirit . . ."*

—from The New Steinerbooks Dictionary of the Paranormal

POLTERGEIST: Force from another world, whirling a path of destruction through a peaceful family, wrenching from their midst a small girl, wreaking the vengeance of the dead against the living.

POLTERGEIST: Can anyone ever still the restless animus, save those upon whom it vents its awesome wrath, and rescue the child who is its prey?

“Some things have to be believed to be seen.”

—Ralph Hodgson

POLTERGEIST

CHAPTER 1

". . . O'er the land of the free, and the home of the brave."

"This is KTCV, Cuesta Verde Television, ending scheduled broadcast of our programming day. Please join us again at six-thirty for 'Traffic Watch,' and until then, have a pleasant Good Morning."

The American flag suddenly disappeared from the screen and was instantly replaced by the hiss of static snow shedding an eerie bluish light across the living room. Steve Freeling slept soundly in his recliner, fifteen feet from the set, lot and parcel maps strewn on the floor around him, lease contracts covering his lap. Except for the white noise of the television, the house was dark and quiet.

Upstairs in the large front bedroom, Steve's wife Diane curled peacefully around her pillow, undisturbed by dream or doubt. The lace curtains blew gently at the open window, on the quiet nights respiration. Outside, it was autumn, a shadow Of change in the air.

Down the hall from Diane was Dana's room. Dana was fifteen, cute, dark haired, snoring, her hand loosely slumped over her own personal telephone. Jeans in a pile by the bed, homework in a pile on the chair, diary stuffed under the mattress, lip gloss poised and waiting on the vanity. She slept like an unself-conscious heiress.

Next to the master bedroom was the children's room. Robbie, seven, slept a fitful sleep, wrapped arm-in-paw with his terry-cloth bear. The floor was covered with a profusion of toys, games, clothes, crayons, and the like—the joyous clutter of the very young. A stuffed clown doll sat lopsided in the rocking chair. Across the room, in a matching imitation frontier bed, slept Robbie's five-year-old sister, Carol Anne. At a few minutes past two-thirty in the morning, Carol Anne opened her eyes.

Without a sound she sat up in bed, swung her legs to the floor, padded out of the room and down the hall to the top of the stairs. Her eyes were open, but without expression—they could as easily have been looking inward as out. Her small legs took her carefully down the steps in the darkness, past the front door, into the living room where her father slumped in his chair.

The television filled the room with its characteristic glow, almost blue, almost white; its long continuous sigh awaiting the morning's transmissions. Carol Anne acted as if she didn't see her slumbering

father. She walked past him without changing the direction of her gaze, walked up to the eye of the television, stared into its depths, touched its face with her tiny hand.

"Hello," she whispered. "Who are you?"

Upstairs, Diane sat bolt upright. She was suddenly cold, and wide awake. Steve wasn't beside her. She got up quickly, threw a robe on, closed the window, ran downstairs. As soon as she entered, Steve woke up, spilling his papers to the floor. They looked at each other, and then at Carol Anne.

The little girl's nose was pressed to the static-filled tube; her gaze tracked the dancing lights as if they were runes flashing a secret message: for her eyes only.

"Where are you?" she sang. "Come closer, I want to see you."

Diane stared bleakly at her daughter, and shivered.

Cuesta Verde Estates was located sixty-seven miles northeast of San Clemente, and spanned over three hundred acres of real estate. Of course, it wasn't all developed yet—it was still a young community—but it was a sound community; it would grow.

Steve Freeling was a major force in that growth. His family had been the first to move into Cuesta Verde, when Robbie was just an infant. The first to move in, the first to plant grass. The land had been barren at the beginning, miles of rolling hills, mostly scrubland. They piped water in, though, planted bushes and saplings, set down roots. Envisioned shopping centers. Real suburban pioneers.

Steve was also the Number One salesman of the entire development. It was easy for him—he believed in this place, believed in this life. He had a home, on a piece of land; he had a family, a job, a future. A vision. He was content with all the world.

Here was his vision—it surrounded him like a sweet dream on this November Sunday afternoon, as it did every Sunday:

Emerson, the neighbor, was mowing his lawn; Emerson's wife, Elaine, lay supine, glistening on their sun deck, rubbing the cellulite from her thighs with coconut oil; Delaney, the neighbor on the other side, was positioning his chair in preparation for watching the Rams wipe the Raiders all over the tube on the front porch; three teens played Frisbee in the middle of the street, as Steve's golden retriever, E. Buzz, chased the flying saucer from hand to hand; barbecue smoke filtered across the sun; and the bright air smelled crisp.

Steve took this all in at a glance, unconsciously, as he cut back his roses—Sunday was the day he tended the garden—and felt a

tremendous sense of well-being. He knew who he was, what life was about. He had it all down.

At thirty-seven, he was a large, handsome man—strapping, even—though he'd begun to develop a well-fed American paunch, and his hairline was higher than he might have liked. He had a bad knee from playing college ball. Only the week before, his doctor had told him his diet was simply terrible. Steve had replied that was no surprise, so was Diane's cooking; whereupon Diane had kicked him under the table with jocular but unexpected vehemence—inadvertently in the bad knee. He'd been limping for a week now, with sometimes theatric exaggeration in Diane's presence—but that was only a tease, and she knew it. For Steve was the gentlest of men; he loved his family dearly.

Diane glimpsed him now from the bedroom window as she straightened up in there. She called out to him not to trim the roses back too much, but he didn't hear her because of the noise from Emerson's lawnmower; she decided it wasn't worth yelling louder. So she paused, just to watch him a moment, then returned to the business at hand.

Where Steve was big, Diane was slight. Wispy auburn hair, delicate fingers—even her arms seemed fragile. Yet she was by far the feistier of the two. In an instant, her pixie face could flush with blood, her eyes focused with will and fire—and then nothing could dissuade her from her purpose. Steve never tried to stand up to this force.

She finished up in the bedroom and moved into the kids' room, humming softly to herself. Robbie's eighth birthday party was this afternoon; she had to get the whole house ready for the onslaught. She made the beds, shuffled most of the toys off the middle of the floor, sat Robbie's big stuffed clown doll up in his rocking chair, put away the clothes, went to feed the parakeet . . . and found the bird dead on the bottom of its cage.

"Oh, Tweetie, poor little twit," she addressed the small creature, half scolding, half sad. She reached into the cage, pulled the bird out, carried it into the bathroom, and held it ceremoniously over the open toilet. "Just like the Vikings, Tweetie—carried out to sea."

"What are you doing to Tweetie?" Carol Anne asked curiously. She stood in the doorway, watching her mother.

"Oh, honey, I didn't see you there. C'mere."

Carol Anne joined her mother at the toilet. Diane had special love for her youngest—the child was wise beyond her years, and had a naive fearlessness about life that was enviable.

"Honey, Tweetie's dead. He died this morning."

"What does that mean, Mommy?"

“It means . . . he’s sort of sleeping, like this. Only he’ll never wake up.”

“Like Grampa?”

“Uh huh, just like Grampa.”

“Then shouldn’t we bury him? I don’t think he likes the water.”

Diane smiled. “Let’s bury him in the backyard. Then you can go visit him when you miss him.”

Carol Anne thought that seemed like a pretty good plan. Her mother helped her find a cigar box full of buttons, which they emptied, then put Tweetie inside, and marched single file out to the backyard in almost formal procession. They decided near the night-blooming jasmine would be best, so it would smell nice for Tweetie. Carol Anne also put half a Twinkie in the box in case he got hungry, and covered him with one of her socks in case it got cold, and included a Polaroid of the whole family, in case Tweetie woke up and got lonely.

“I know you said they don’t wake up,” Carol Anne said with considered seriousness, almost with secrecy, “but maybe he will.”

“Maybe so,” Diane agreed. She looked at her child with unmodified love, and kissed her on the forehead.

They took turns digging the soft black earth with Carol Anne’s beach shovel. When they reached a depth of one foot, they lowered the cigar box, then covered it over.

Robbie watched this ritual from the top of the old oak tree that gnarled outside his bedroom window. It was one of the few old trees in the whole area, but wouldn’t be getting much older—it was almost dead. Twisted, black, and massive, with only a few green branches still growing near the top. Steve kept meaning to cut it down, but never found the time. Meanwhile, Robbie had appropriated it for his own use, and, as with any self-respecting seven-year-old, that use involved a lot of climbing.

He’d in fact developed a rather complex relationship with the giant oak. It told him secrets about the earth; he told it about his adventures with pirates. It contained a hidden door to an underground city at times. At other times, it was a great monster god from Jupiter, with wild flame-blackened arms, waiting to be released from its spell, and only Robbie knew the words to free it. It almost always heard Robbie’s thoughts; sometimes the thoughts made the tree angry; sometimes they laughed together.

Occasionally—as now—the tree was the living mast of an alien ship that sailed slowly beneath the ground. Robbie sat balanced in the

crow's-nest of the highest branches, viewing the journey ahead, the dramas below.

In the front yard he could see his father puttering in a father-way. That was good. Out back, Mom and Carol Anne were burying a box near the far corner. He would ask Carol Anne about it later—they were probably making an offering to the plant-people, or maybe hiding something they didn't want Dad to see, or maybe the box was a treasure. He'd ask Carol Anne later.

Down on the porch, he watched his big sister, Dana, sitting on the floor with two of her girl friends, looking at the pictures in a fan magazine and giggling and whispering and making hand gestures of the sort he knew they shouldn't be making. He couldn't understand what they found so interesting in those magazines; it just made Dana mad when he asked.

Over on the next block, he saw Bill Moone set off a cherry bomb in Murphy's garbage can, and run behind the fence. Everything stopped for a moment at the explosion, then resumed its measured pace. Murphy came running out, but only shook his head and went back inside.

Bill Moone would be coming to Robbie's party later that afternoon—they could laugh secretly about this one together: the baffled expression on old Murphy's face, the great way a cherry bomb in a trash can sounded just like an M-80 . . . and only Bill and Robbie would know that Bill had done it. Robbie smiled like an astronaut with all systems Go.

Three blocks away, at the top of the nearest hill, two kids started a skateboard race—in slow motion, at that distance. Robbie lifted his eyes a fraction and peered beyond them, to the horizon. Dark clouds obscured the sky. They looked cold.

Storm coming in.

Diane had things pretty much ready for the party by a couple of hours later—crêpe paper hung, tail-less donkey on the wall, favors on the dining room table, virgin cake as a centerpiece. Dana and her friends were recruited to do some of the decorating. The request was met initially with grand protestations from Dana; her girl friends acquiesced easily, however (it wasn't *their* brother's party, after all), so Dana could do little but look martyred and hang crêpe.

Robbie got ready early—showered, hair combed, clothes neat—so he could devote the extra time to getting things just right: the right toys available, the rest cached away. He had an urgent whispered conference with his mother explaining that Carol Anne would be

allowed to join the party only if it could be assured she wouldn't follow Bill Moone around all the time, bothering him. Diane gave her assurance.

Before too long the party guests started arriving—some alone, some dropped off by a parent; all cleaned and brushed and bearing brightly wrapped gifts. Several parents stayed: a couple of moms to help Diane orchestrate the chaos; a few dads to watch the football game in the den.

The game was well into the first quarter by the time the party was underway, though, so some disgruntled fathers were forced to miss one or two key plays during the shuttling of the revelers. Jim Shaw's father was the last to arrive, carrying two cartons of Michelob Lite and a giant bag of Nacho Doritos.

"What'd I miss?" Shaw demanded, pulling a beer from the brown paper bag.

"Sshh!"

"Haden fumbled!"

"Sacked!"

"Oakland's bringing out Bahr."

"Three more! Jesus! I was ahead on points when I left home, now I'm pushing."

"Sshhhh!"

In the next room, the volume of the birthday celebration was rising exponentially. Pin-the-tail-on-the-donkey and clothespin-in-the-bottle established the proper tone of frenzied giddiness, but it wasn't until musical chairs that the first tears came—Carol Anne's, when she lost her seat to Robbie in the third go-around.

Diane decided that meant a critical mass of excitement was being reached, and activity needed to be somewhat diffused. So she started everyone off on the Treasure Hunt. Each person received his own special secret clue, and was turned loose—anywhere on the ground floor, inside or out, Dad's den excluded. Lots of little treasures, one big prize. They all oohed and aahed as the clues were passed out, and the hunt was on.

Carol Anne couldn't read the clues, so she was made Mom's Special Helper in the kitchen, for which she got her own Special Prize—a Lady Doctor Kit, complete with stethoscope, tongue depressor, thermometer, hat, and note pad. She spent the next fifteen minutes listening to the hearts of Diane and the other moms, while the furtive skittering of pint-sized treasure-seekers could be heard all over the nether regions of the house, punctuated by an occasional squeal of

discovery.

Carol Anne soon became bored, though, so she meandered unobtrusively into the den, where the other party was going on, and sat in Steve's lap.

"Daddy, wanna hear my dream?"

"Not now, sweetheart, Daddy's busy watching the game."

"What's Haden think he's doin'?" raged Shaw.

"Gettin' creamed is what."

It sounded pretty boring to Carol Anne, so she left, wearing her stethoscope, and headed upstairs to see if Dana wanted to play.

In the den, the game started getting really exciting.

"Look at that Dennard run!" Steve marveled.

"Lester Hayes! Fuckin' Lester Hayes is there! He's there! He's . . ."

Out of nowhere, the channel changed, all by itself, to "Mister Rogers." The fans jumped up in shock and dismay.

Steve ran over to the back window and screamed out: "Tuthill—you asshole!"

"Turn it back! Quick!" begged Shaw in baffled outrage.

"Sorry, guys," Steve muttered, returning to the set. "When my neighbor uses his remote . . . he's on my same frequency." He manually turned the channel changer back to football.

Diane stepped in sternly. "Okay, which asshole's talking like that in front of twenty kids?"

They gave her deferential attention with one eye, keeping the other on the game.

"But Tuthill—" Steve began to protest. Diane stalked out, her point made.

A second later, Mister Rogers was singing again. Everyone groaned. Shaw actually wrung his hands. Steve walked resolutely over to the window, pointed his remote control box, and fired.

From across the yard, a distant voice roared angrily. "Don't start, Freeling!"

Steve stormed out the sliding glass door to the patio at the side of the house, and yelled over his fence to a man standing in the back doorway of the house behind them. "We got a game going on over here, Tuthill!"

"My kids wanna watch 'Mister Rogers'!" Tuthill yelled back.

"I don't care what you're watching, as long as you show a little mercy with that thing!"

"Move your set!" neighbor Tuthill's voice rang out before he slammed his back door.

"Move yours!"

"Mister Rogers" went on again just as Steve reentered the den. The assembled moaned; Shaw tossed a handful of Doritos in the air. Furiously, Steve aimed, and fired his remote once more. A muffled "goddammit" could be heard from the Tuthills.

Carol Anne, meanwhile, made it upstairs and slipped into Dana's room. Dana lay prone on the floor, having a Serious Conversation with Heather and Serena.

"Hi, Dana, wanna hear my dream?" Carol Anne asked.

"Hi, squirt. Not right now; we're talking."

"Can I listen to your heart?"

"I haven't got a heart, punk."

"What are you talking about?"

"How gross this place is."

"I don't think it's gross."

"That's because everything about it has the mentality of a five-year-old—which is fine if you're five, squirt, but it's a drag for the big kids." She sat up, unbuttoned her shirt. "Okay, here, you can listen to my heart."

Robbie suddenly burst into the room with a clue in his hand. Dana closed her shirt and shouted. "Robbie! Mom!"

"Jeez, take it easy, I thought the treasure was here. It's only you trolls, though." He ran out as she threw a shoe.

"Come on, let's go to the drugstore."

The three girls got up and left.

Carol Anne wandered down the hall toward her parents' room.

Robbie sat on the stairs, studying his clue: *Between the frill and the grill*. He thought at first it had meant between the frilly apron on the living room couch and the grill of the heating vent against the wall. But there'd been nothing around there. He'd looked all around the kitchen grill, even though there were no frills there at all. Then he'd gone up to Dana's room, which was full of frills, but of course had no grills—and anyway, creepy Dana was there. So now what? Bill Moone already *had* his prize—a great ray gun that sprayed red light with D batteries. So where was this frill and grill stuff?

The barbecue grill outside! That was it! It was right next to that real frilly tablecloth Mom dumped over a pile of bricks way out back. He jumped up and ran downstairs, tore out the side door, and across the

grassy yard. Some kids had found their prizes, and were gloating smugly in the living room; others were still hunting all over the house, up-ending pillows, looking under rugs; others had given up, and now either played or moped. Robbie made it out to the grill, looked inside it, behind it, under it. Nothing. He went to the cloth over the bricks, peeled it back, poked around between the gritty cinderblocks until . . . wait . . . yes, over there, wedged in among those three—with the excitement of impending triumph, he reached into the little cove, put his hand around the object . . . and jumped back with a yelp. Something had bitten him.

He looked at his hand, more startled than anything else. His index finger was a bit red, and still stung. He peered back into the dark collection of upright bricks at the obscure thing—whatever it was. There . . . did it move? Robbie picked up the barbecue poker in his right hand, raised the poker over his head, kicked away one low wall of bricks, and jumped back.

It was the clown doll.

His old stuffed clown doll, grinning devilishly, a little too broadly. It gave Robbie the creeps to look at it now. He backed off.

This didn't make sense. Was this his prize? Couldn't be. Besides, the clown had been up in the bedroom just before the party; Robbie had seen it there; he was certain. Sitting right up in the rocking chair. Now it grinned at him from a funny angle, caught between two bricks.

For a brief moment, Robbie's teeth chattered.

Then he heard his mother call him from the house, so he turned and ran back in.

The party continued. Prizes were passed out, even to those who hadn't discovered their own. The Opening of Presents took place on the living room floor, with only one serious squabble developing over first use of the Malibu Speed Raceway Set. E. Buzz came in from his Frisbee marathon and barked a lot.

Finally the main event: the cake, the candles, the singing, the blowing-out, the paper plates, the plastic forks. The traditional food fight. It was during the earliest tactical maneuvers of saturation cake-bombing that they all heard the screams. Coming from upstairs.

Diane was up the steps first, Steve out the den and right behind her. Others followed, electric with vicarious fear: these were the screams of a child. Coming from the master bedroom.

When they entered they found the television on, tuned to static snow. Carol Anne stood in front of it, inches from it, staring into it, her eyes wild with alarm. The little red plastic stethoscope was still around her neck. She was screaming uncontrollably.

The party quickly ended.

They put Carol Anne to bed. She slept soundly for an hour, then woke up refreshed and unconcerned, in time for dinner. She had no memory of the event.

“Pass the peas,” Robbie shouted across the table. He was feeling imperious on this significant occasion. This was his day.

“Pass the peas, *please*,” grumbled his father. Steve was still pissed off about Tuthill, still upset about Carol Anne, still fed up with the Rams.

“Peas please, peas please, peas please . . .”

“Robert . . .”

“Would you please pass the peas please?” Robbie intoned sweetly. One could afford to be magnanimous on one’s birthday, as well.

“Dad, can I sleep over at Heather’s tonight?” asked Dana.

“Not unless you can show me you’ve finished your geometry . . .”

“Come on, that’s not fair, I . . .”

“Life is not fair. That’s a good lesson to learn. In fact, you can’t go to Heather’s even if you *do* finish your homework. How’s that?”

“Mom!” Dana whined.

“Do your math, and we’ll see,” Diane mediated. “Now, can we please have a little peace around here for a change?” There was a thin edge to her voice.

“Pass the peace, pleace,” piped up Robbie. There was a pause, and then, quite unexpectedly, everybody laughed. Tension broken. You could be magic on your birthday.

“From the mouths of babes.” Diane shook her head.

“I’m no babe. I’m eight.”

They were all feeling better still by the time they actually got some food down—nothing but cake and soda pop all day for the young kids, and beer and Doritos for the big kids, hadn’t helped anyone’s temperament. E. Buzz sensed it was time to shuffle under the table for handouts.

By second helping, Dana was talking about school, Diane was raving about the latest book she was reading on textural design elements, and Steve was even joking about Tuthill.

“That guy has to be the biggest jerk ever born—I think he uses the remote just to annoy me.”

“How’s that work, Dad? Making the channels change from way over

there, I mean. Seems kinda magic."

"Well . . . it's like radio waves, sort of, Robbie. People send out these electrical signals from far away, and they get picked up by the radio and turned into music. Same with this. The remote box just sends an electrical signal, and it jiggles up the electrical signals inside the set, makes 'em switch over to another channel. It's all electronics."

"But electricity's supposed to make sparks, I thought."

"Well, some does. Some just makes signals, though—they move through the air, and you can't see 'em."

"Like ghosts?"

"Sort of. Yeah. Friendly ghosts."

"Like Casper."

"I had a dream about ghosts," said Carol Anne, with wide blue eyes.

"Was it scary, Carol?" asked Dana.

"Uh uh, they were friendly ghosts, too."

"What happened in the dream, sweetheart?" Diane nudged. She always encouraged her children to tell their dreams—dreams were the window to the soul, her mother used to tell her, and she believed it still.

"I was walking in the park, and these people were floating through the trees, and they wanted to play with me, but they couldn't see where I was, but I didn't tell them, but they liked my new dress, but they were afraid of the ugly man, so I wanted to leave, but then I was falling."

"You know what Freud said about falling dreams, Mom," commented Dana.

"No, what did he say?"

Dana just raised her eyebrows up and down.

"That's a very interesting dream, honey," said Steve. "Were the people wearing sheets like ghosts, too?"

"Uh uh, they had all kinds of funny clothes."

"You mean like a clown?"

Robbie was suddenly jolted by this remark, remembering his incident with the clown in the bricks out back. Unconsciously, he rubbed his finger.

"Uh uh, not like a clown." Carol Anne shook her head. "Like the pictures in Gramma's big book."

Steve furrowed his brow at Diane. "Your mother's scrapbook?"

"Uh huh," Carol Anne nodded. "The crapbook."

Dana smirked; Robbie clapped his hand over his mouth. “All right, you two,” Diane muttered. Then, to Carol Anne: “That’s ‘*scrap book*,’ baby. Not crapbook. Scrapbook.”

Dana fluttered her eyelids. “She’s just being scatological, Mother.”

“And you can stop being so precocious; it’s very tedious. And you can clear the table, too.” Diane piled two plates in front of her elder daughter.

“Yes, Mother.” Dana spoke in her most gracious voice, balanced four plates on her head, turned, said, “Perfect posture, stately elegance, and grace,” and walked into the kitchen without dropping a single leftover pea.

Robbie jumped up and walked behind her a few steps, wiggling his rear in caricature.

“Okay, that’s enough. Help your sister, Robbie,” Steve said. Robbie returned to the table and gathered silverware.

Diane tipped her head toward Carol Anne. “Guess she was impressed with those old photos. Some of them are of *my* grandparents. A few great-grandparents, even, I think.”

Steve smiled at Carol Anne. “Well, that was *very* interesting, sweetheart. And it just goes to show that ghosts aren’t always scary.”

Carol Anne nodded, but she was more interested now in trying to pick up a pea off the table with her tongue.

Diane scrunched up her face at Steve. “What *did* Freud say about falling dreams?”

There was suddenly a major crash in the kitchen—the sound of dishes breaking on tile counter top.

“That comes out of your allowance, young lady,” Diane called.

“Aw, Mom, that’s not fair!”

“Don’t you remember?” Steve boomed jovially. “Life’s not fair!” Then he leaned over and gave Diane a playful kiss. “How soon they forget,” he murmured.

Diane showed up late at the PTA meeting, sat in the back row so she could leave early, and then spent the entire question-and-answer period arguing with the speaker about the reinstitution of corporal punishment in the school system.

When it was all over, and they adjourned to the back of the auditorium for coffee and doughnuts, Diane ran into Doris Melnick. Doris’s son, Eddie, was in Robbie’s class at school; moreover, coincidentally, Doris and Diane had attended the same high school in

Encino—though in different graduating classes—many years before. They'd never really been friends, exactly, and they didn't keep in touch now, really, but those connections were enough so that when they bumped into each other at functions like this one, they felt gratefully friendly. And even, oddly enough, intimate, in a way people are when they don't know each other very well.

"Diane!"

"Doris, hi! Thank God, a friendly face. Can you believe that idiot up on the podium?"

"They lay a hand on my kid, I'm gonna get my .32 that Larry bought me, and waste 'em. That's what."

"I mean, these are supposed to be educated people. Educators! Don't they know children respond better to positive reinforcement than negative? I mean, my God, you show a kid love, and he'll behave ten times more than if you whack him," Diane said.

"Ah, what do these turkeys know about raising kids?"

"Not a damn thing, obviously. But how you doin'?"

"Can't complain—oh, I could, but what good would it do? Am I right? You bet I am. But anyway, I'm going back to school. Did I tell you that?"

"No! That's terrific. You know, I've been thinking of doing that, maybe not necessarily going for my degree, but like extension courses—now that Carol Anne's in school . . ."

"Your youngest in kindergarten already? Well, I'll be. She was such a cutie pie. How is she?"

"Well . . ." Diane let the vaguest cloud thicken her voice. "She started sleepwalking a few weeks ago."

"No lie!" exclaimed Doris, wolfing down a chocolate doughnut. "Somnambulism! Poor baby. What are you doing for her?"

"Well . . . I took her in to the school psychologist. They, you know, gave her a couple tests, and said she was fine. Said she'd outgrow it." Diane sipped her coffee uncertainly.

"Honey, I don't want to worry you—and I'm sure your little girl is just fine—but these school psychologists are like school nurses. About all they can do is take a temperature wrong. This speaker here tonight—he was a school psychologist. If I was you, I'd get a second opinion."

"Why? What do you think it could be?"

"Hell, I don't know, I'm no specialist. Look, probably it *is* nothing; she *will* outgrow it—all I know is, you need a specialist for everything these days. For your left eye, for your big toe. Carol Anne's got

somnambulism, she needs a somnambulism specialist. Am I right?"

"Where in the world would I find one of those?"

Doris beamed. "It just so happens, my cousin Bernice's sister-in-law has a little boy who had—guess—somnambulism. And they took him to this incredible specialist; they couldn't stop talking about this guy. They said the kid was cured. This was probably, oh, less than a year ago. So I'll get the number tomorrow and give you a call."

"Would you?"

"Would I? You gotta getta specialist, Diane. Am I right? You bet I am."

* * *

Thunder rumbled over the distance, came closer, rattled the windows. Robbie and Carol Anne looked up from their respective vantage points in the bedroom—he on his bed, gluing a new model rocket ship together—birthday booty—she on the floor playing with a train—and looked down again. Carol Anne just thought it was the sky coughing, but Robbie didn't like the thunder at all. He feared the tree was angry. And then just as he thought that thought, a stark flash of lightning illuminated the yard, and he could see the old oak clearly just outside his window: its silhouette bent ominously in the wind, its branches scraping the windowpane like claws scrabbling on porcelain. Once more, thunder shook the house.

"I think it's watching us," whispered Carol Anne. She wasn't afraid, only commenting.

"It is not," Robbie crabbed at his sister. She said the dumbest things sometimes. He didn't look out the window.

Diane walked in. "Okay, you two, time for bed. Both brush your teeth?"

They nodded.

"Under the covers, then, and get to sleep."

"How can anybody sleep with all that noise?" Robbie insisted. "I think we should . . ."

Diane turned out the lights.

"Closet light, turn on the closet," Robbie cried urgently.

"Okay, okay," Diane answered. "I'm getting it now." She turned on the bulb in the closet they used for a night light. "Now, good night."

"No, wait, look inside first," the boy pleaded. He sat up in bed. Far away, thunder growled.

Diane opened the closet door wide and made a grand show of

exploring its depths. "Okay, I'm looking behind the clothes. Nothing here. Now inside the shoe boxes. Nope. Now behind the broken footstool. Nobody here. Looks okay." She emerged smiling. "Looks clear, nothing hiding."

Robbie appeared satisfied. Diane went to each bed, gave them each a good-night kiss, and went back to her own bedroom.

That was when Robbie noticed the clown doll sitting in the rocking chair.

He actually jumped, it startled him so. Not that the clown had suddenly appeared, exactly—it was only that Robbie had become suddenly aware of its being there. And suddenly aware that it had been outside, lying under a pile of cinderblocks earlier in the day. It seemed to be laughing now, a silent, frozen laugh.

Robbie got up from bed without looking at the laughing doll, picked a plaid shirt off the floor, and threw it over the clown's head. Then he got back in bed.

Lightning struck far away, electric blue, and a few seconds later the thunder throatily thundered.

Or was it muffled laughter?

Steve sat in bed in his shorts, rolling a joint and watching an old Bogart movie on the tube. Diane jumped in and sat beside him.

"Were you that scared when you were his age?" she asked.

"What scared?"

"Robbie—the poor kids scared of the closet."

"It's the age. Seven is closets. I remember."

"Oh yeah? What's thirty-seven?"

"Interest rates. I'm scared of interest rates now. What worries you?"

Lightning sizzled miles away; the television set crackled with static. Steve licked the paper, put one end in his mouth, lit the other, inhaled.

"Carole Anne's sleepwalking. That's what really worries me."

"Shell outgrow it." He passed her the joint. Thunder.

"But did you see her last night? Glued to the set downstairs and having a conversation?"

"All kids talk to themselves."

"She was talking to the TV. And she was sleeping." Diane took a long drag, then brushed a lock of hair out of Steve's eyes. "And then that business this afternoon . . . it was frightening, Steven."

"What did the psychologist say?" he asked.

"Said she'll outgrow it," Diane answered.

Steve smiled. "Want to get a second opinion?"

Diane shrugged. "Maybe. Doris Melnick said we should. Or maybe we shouldn't start building the pool now, is all. Maybe we should wait until she does outgrow it. I mean, Steve, she could walk right out there in the middle of the night and fall into it and we'd never even know until morning."

"Relax, honey; take it easy. We just have to remember to keep the doors locked, that's all; she can't get out then." He leaned over and nibbled Diane's ear; her face softened. "Don't you want a pool?" he crooned.

"Pool, schmool, big deal." She pushed him back, laughing. "First pool on the block. First family on the block . . ."

"First kiss of the night," he rumbled, in the same register as the approaching thunder.

They kissed. On the little screen at the foot of the bed, Humphrey Bogart kissed Lauren Bacall. On the dressing table against the wall, two ceramic figurines curtsied and bowed.

"Mommy, I'm scared." It was Robbie standing at the bedroom door. Diane tried to hide the joint.

Steve smiled at her and sighed. "Ah, the family life." Then to Robbie, "Okay, come on, partner, let's chase it away." He walked over to his son, picked the boy up, and lifted him to his shoulders. "Watch your head." They marched down the hall.

Steve sat on the bed beside Robbie. The tree scratched at the window.

Carol Anne huddled under her covers across the room. "It's trying to get in, Daddy," she whispered.

"Now, that tree does not want to get into this house," Steve instructed them matter-of-factly. "That tree is very old, and its name is Ebeneezer, and it just so happens that it is guarding your room, so nothing bad can get in—even if there was something bad out there, which there's not."

Outside, the wind rose, pulling a trash can lid off somewhere and crashing it down the street. Lightning struck again, revealing the tree once more: its shape seemed almost to have changed, its arms groping toward the house, its main fork a gaping maw. The children jumped—thunder boomed—they jumped again.

"Now then," Steve went on, in a calm, fatherly voice, "all you have to do is count the seconds between when the lightning hits and when

the thunder comes. If you can count to seven, the storm's a mile away. And if you can count higher, the storm is getting even farther away. So there's nothing to worry about. Okay?"

"I can count to eleven, Daddy," Carol Anne volunteered.

"That's terrific, Sweet Pea. Let's hear."

"One, two, three, four . . ."

"No, wait until the lightning hits, Carol Anne."

The lightning hit.

"One, two, three . . ."

Steve rose quietly, and walked out the room.

". . . seven, eight, nine . . ."

From far away, the heavens rumbled. The children were quiet. Steve went back to his room.

On the way there, he stopped by Dana's closed door and put his ear to it. Music. He opened it a crack and peeked in.

"Good night, Dana."

"Uh, g'night, Dad."

"Off the phone, Dana."

"Uh, okay, Dad."

He closed the door again and went back to his own room, smiling the smile of a satisfied patron.

Robbie stared out into the night. Shadows moved, tried to push the house over. The house creaked under the strain.

Finally, the rain came. It spattered the window at first, then drove down in a flood, churning the air, pelting the glass, distorting everything even more. Robbie was certain of it now: they were under attack.

The night flashed white again, like a missile explosion in deep space, silent, violent. The tree writhed as if in pain. Robbie counted to himself, waiting for the shock wave: ". . . five, six, seven . . ."

The thunder started low, like a growling cur, came closer in waves along the ground, finally reached the house, shook the house, pounded the house. Robbie grabbed his terry-cloth bear, and they held each other tightly. Carol Anne had the covers over her eyes, but kept peeking out, uncertain what to think, taking her cues from her older brother.

Again, the lightning. The tree bent forward now, clenched its broken fists, battered the side of the house. The hollow that formed its mouth was open wide: laughing, screaming.

“. . . two, three . . .”

The thunder came more quickly this time, heavier, more insistent. It seemed to grab the house and shake, and it wouldn’t let go. The tree claws began tapping at the window. The wind keened like a ghoul; rain began to leak under the window. Robbie tried to close his eyes, but he couldn’t look away, couldn’t *not* see, couldn’t . . .

A terrible bolt slammed into the tree—the flash was blinding, the shock wave instantaneous, an overwhelming concussion of sound and light. The tree raised up its arms; the children screamed, jumped out of bed, ran down the hall crying.

Steve and Diane sat up with a start, then smiled compassionately as the young ones burst into the room.

“Okay,” Steve said, holding out his arms, “everybody in bed for a camp-in. Waddaya wanna watch—‘Superman’ or ‘Dallas’?”

Everybody jumped in bed.

“. . . Please join us again at six-thirty for ‘Traffic Watch,’ and until then, have a pleasant Good Morning.”

The flag was replaced by a screen full of white snow, as KTCV went off the air. Outside, the rain continued—steadily, without direction or anger. The wind, too, seemed lower; the lightning was now so far away it barely flickered on the horizon, barely disturbed the static on the set. The thunder was gone altogether.

Four bodies slept soundly in the big California King—Steve, Robbie, Carol Anne, Diane. They looked chalky in the glow of the picture tube, looked like ghosts. In the rest of the house, all was still.

Suddenly Carol Anne opened her eyes. She sat up, crawled to the end of the bed, climbed down to the floor, walked up to the television.

Shadow-images moved in the snow, shaped in the static.

“Hello,” she rasped.

Muffled whispers crept out of the screen. A voice. No, many voices, moving as the shapes moved. Semiforms with semivoices, calling, moving, shifting.

“I can’t hear you,” Carol Anne answered in wonder. She wasn’t afraid, only curious, or just a little amazed. “Are you there?”

The whispers grew. Tiny flashes of light sparked across the screen now, like microscopic photon explosions, crystals of light. Carol Anne reached out her hand.

A hand reached back.

A hand of smoke, formless, without substance, exuded from the

television screen toward the little girl. Without form, yet somehow handlike, with fingers that curled upward, then down, momentarily encompassing her head—palpating her, testing, tasting the softness of her hair, her delicate neck.

Then it rose, this handlessness rose above the girl and stretched farther into the room, stretched its pulsing tendrils along an ectoplasmic arm that grew longer every second, remaining attached to the screen—stretched until the hand hovered above the bed, above the peaceful sleepers.

Slowly, deliberately, it lowered itself to the bed, to each figure in turn. First it settled over the boy, pushed a cold finger in the slight depression of his chest, stroked his cheek, muffled his whimpers.

Then Diane. It crawled along her skin, rolled her over, pressed her down, while another finger wrapped around Steve's leg, squeezed, grew.

Presently it rose again, hung above them in the air once more. Carol Anne watched in fascination. Its fingers never ceased moving, probing. Finally, it reached the wall above the bed and stopped, its greenish, tentacular arm extending the length of the room. It grew brighter, it was engorged with light . . . when all at once it shot out of the set and into the wall with a deafening BAM.

Everyone jumped awake, Robbie immediately crying. The room suddenly began shaking, the window cracked, pictures dropped from the walls, light bulbs exploded. The ceramic figurines flew across the room, shattered against the dresser.

And then, just as suddenly, everything stopped. The room fell into an unnatural hush. Outside, the storm passed away utterly.

For a long moment, no one—nothing—moved.

And then Carol Anne whispered: "They're here."

CHAPTER 2

Monday morning, Steve began clearing away the debris from the side of the house—the branch that the lightning had sheared off the oak, parts of torn-up bushes, shingles, soggy papers. It was a mess.

Beyond him in the back, a bulldozer made deep cuts in the earth, sloping at one end, squared-off at the other: groundwork on the swimming pool. Inside, he could hear Diane bustling around the kitchen, clattering dishes, making breakfast. Just another typical insane Monday morning.

Ben Tuthill walked across the lawn from his house in the rear, hands in his pockets. Tuthill was dumb, bald, and puffy. Steve couldn't stand him; still, he felt obliged at least to run through the neighborly forms. He was always willing to give the asshole one more chance, though he was never quite sure why.

Tuthill left his hands in his pockets as he got closer to Steve—he wasn't about to dirty his hands helping a jerk like Freeling with any manual labor. He'd mostly just come over to gloat, and make some obscure point. Steve ignored him for a few seconds longer than was polite, to finish clearing some brambles out of the drainpipe, then brushed off his hands and smiled broadly.

"Morning, Tuthill."

"Looks like a disaster area over here, Freeling."

"Yeah, I just talked to the governor—he'll be sending in troops and aid any minute. You suppose we could use your roof for the helicopters?"

"Told you you should have cut this tree down ages ago."

Steve rubbed his knee, leaned on the porch railing. "This isn't so bad. It's the quake damage inside that'll be hard to clean up."

"What quake you talkin' about?"

"You didn't feel it? Shook us all up last night, about two-thirty. Pictures all over the floor."

"Didn't hear about any earthquake on the radio this morning, either. Just this old tree rattlin' your windows in the storm, most likely. Ought to get rid of this thing; it's a hazard." Tuthill smiled and walked back home, hands still in his pockets.

Steve went into the kitchen. Robbie and Carol Anne sat at the table,

trying to decide whether to eat, fight, or slip pieces of bacon to E. Buzz under the table. Diane beat eggs in a copper bowl while she talked into the phone cradled on her shoulder. A small black-and-white Sony on the counter blared the "Today Show". Dana was fixing her hair in the reflection of the microwave window, and eating a Figurine.

"Gotta run," said Steve. He grabbed a muffin, grabbed a feel, and was out the door before Diane could chastise him.

Robbie jumped up, said, "Gotta run," and darted for the door, but his mother was faster.

"Finish your milk first," she ordered. Robbie sat down. Diane spoke back into the phone, "I can't today. Steve's taking the wagon, and I can't sardine sixteen Brownies into a Datsun."

Dana checked her mouth in the reflection as she spoke. "You could arrange 'em all on a plate and put them in the glove compartment."

"Human Brownies, wise guy," Diane bantered across the room. "Okay, gotta go, Sharon, see you at the Antique Guild." She hung up the phone and poured her scrambled eggs onto the hot skillet.

"Mom, can me and Heather and Serena get an apartment by ourselves?"

"You absolutely may not. I don't even know why you'd ask such a thing." Diane lightly salted the cooking eggs, stirred them.

"It's not that I don't simply adore it here." Dana was still speaking to her own spectral image in the microwave window. "It's just that with these earthquakes earthquakes earthquakes all the time, I can't get any homework done. I think this place has bad karma."

"What's karma?" Robbie piped up.

"Karma is what's gonna make you come back as a jockstrap after you die, 'cause you're such a toad now." Dana finished checking her hair and sat down.

"Dana, I don't need that kind of talk at breakfast," Diane said, bringing the eggs over to the table.

"Eeeeew—mangled chicken embryos—probably one of the earthquake victims . . ."

"Dana!"

The dog barked. Carol Anne got up from the table, walked over to the television, turned it to Channel 8. White noise. Dreamily, she sat in front of it, staring at the snow.

"Carol Anne . . ." Diane began, a look of concern on her face.

Dana picked up her school books. "Maybe the fault line runs just

under our house. Wouldn't that be a scream?"

"The ceiling got crumbs all over my bed," said Robbie.

"Carol Anne," Diane said again to the girl staring into the set, "do you remember when you said, 'They're here,' last night?"

"Uh huh," said Carol Anne, without looking up.

"Who did you mean, sweetheart. Who's here?"

"The TV people," she answered dreamily, her mouth full of cereal.

"She's stoned," grinned Robbie.

"What do you know about it, nitwit?" Dana said with a pained look.

"More'n you. Ask Dad."

Before Diane could gripe at them to behave, the milk glass crumbled in Robbie's hand—virtually disintegrated into a hundred pieces, expelling the milk forcefully all over the table. She started toward the boy, but suddenly out of the corner of her eye, thought she saw a spoon in the dish rack bend. She gasped, dropped her towel. The milk spilled over Dana's pants.

"Hey!" she yelled.

Robbie threw up his hands. "It's not my mess."

Dana jumped up from the table. "Thanks a lot, jerko—I've got class in twenty minutes."

"Mom!" yelled Robbie.

"Give me that glass before you cut yourself."

Robbie handed Diane the broken glass, then seized the opportunity. "Late for school, Mom, gotta run." He charged out the door and slammed it behind him.

Leaving Diane alone with Carol Anne, who was busy fine-tuning the snow on the screen, and Dana, who ran upstairs to change pants.

"Sweetheart," Diane proded Carol Anne, "what did you mean last night when you said, 'They're here'?"

"The TV people." She continued gazing into the static.

"But what do you mean, honey? What TV people?"

Carol Anne looked quizzically at her mother for a second, as if searching for something, then turned back to the television and studied the dots.

Doris Melnick called a half hour later, to give Diane the name and number of Dr. Bremer. The Specialist.

"But the thing is," said Doris, "you've got to go see him right now,

or else you've got to wait six weeks—I mean, the man is booked solid, but I just talked to his secretary and they had a cancellation this morning. This *morning*. I mean, is that an omen, or what?"

Diane didn't believe in omens, as such, but she did believe in opportunities, taken and missed. And she didn't relish the idea of waiting around through six more weeks of Carol Anne's conversations with channel zero—not to mention the previous day's screaming episode.

"Okay, where do I sign up?" she responded after a moment's consideration.

Doris gave her directions to the office building, and two hours later Diane found herself sitting in a tastefully decorated reception room with Carol Anne, staring nervously at carpeted walls while Muzak fed out a selection of tunes like "Mr. Sandman," "Dream, Dream, Dream," and "Tossin' and Turnin' All Night." The stenciled letters on the door read:

CARL BREMER, M.D., Ph.D.
SLEEP DISORDERS

After about five minutes, the intercom on the receptionist's desk buzzed discreetly, whereupon the receptionist told Diane the doctor would see them now. Diane and Carol Anne stood, and then entered the main office.

Dr. Bremer rose to meet them.

"How do you do? I'm Dr. Bremer. You must be Mrs. Freeling . . . and you must be Carol Anne." He smiled, shook hands with them both. He was much younger than Diane had expected; she was a bit taken aback. Carol Anne looked sheepishly at the floor.

"Yes, I . . . how do you do?"

They went through the standard formalities and pleasantries; then Dr. Bremer soon came right to the point. "And now—how may I help you?"

"Well. My daughter started sleepwalking several weeks ago, and it seems to be getting worse. It started out, we'd wake up in the morning and find her sleeping in the bathtub, of all places. Once we found her in the front room in a daze, tearing all the leaves off the Ficus. But mostly, it's the television. She just sits in front of the set, tuned to white noise, *talking* to it. Then there's the strange dreams she's been having, and then yesterday we found her in front of the TV screaming bloody murder; I swear, it took an hour to calm her down and then when she woke up after her nap she didn't remember a thing." Diane sat back in her chair with an almost audible "whew." That had all just

come pouring out—it had been building up in her more than she'd realized.

Dr. Bremer smiled reassuringly. "First of all, Mrs. Freeling, stop worrying so much. This isn't such an uncommon problem, and it isn't all that serious, most likely."

"What do you mean, 'most likely'?" Diane instantly seized on the qualification.

"I mean that by and large these episodes of simple somnambulism are not associated with any significant pathology. And generally, the child outgrows them. Our therapy is aimed toward keeping the child in a secure environment, so he—she—doesn't inadvertently harm herself."

As Dr. Bremer was speaking, Diane's eye was caught by a large print hanging on the wall beyond his desk—a picture of a woman in a nightgown, sleeping sprawled on her bed, a bizarre little demon sitting on top of her, a wild horse's head emerging out of the dark background.

Bremer noticed her notice it. "Striking painting, isn't it? Just a copy, of course. It's titled *The Nightmare*, by Fuseli. People used to think dreams were visitations—by devils, angels, incubi, whatever. We know better, now, of course." He spoke with a secure arrogance that was comforting.

"Well." Diane relaxed a little. "Where do we go from here?"

"We can set up some dates in the future for EEG recording, a few psychological screening tests—TAT, MMPI, and so on. For right now, though, why don't we just have Carol Anne tell me what some of these dreams have been about?" He scrunched down to Carol Anne's level. "Can you tell me some of your dreams, Carol Anne? I'd really like to know."

Carol Anne became shy, looked in her lap, looked at her mother, giggled, looked at her mother again.

"Go ahead, Carol Anne, stop being so silly. Tell Dr. Bremer, just like you tell me and Daddy. Tell him the one about the orange bird."

Maternal sanction seemed to do the trick. Carol Anne's eyes got wide, as she started to remember all of her dream-people.

"The fire-man?" She looked at her mother. Diane nodded, and Carol Anne turned toward Bremer. "He's not really a man, he's really a bird, but really he's made of fire."

"Uh huh, and what does he do in your dream?"

"Oh, he flies, and he's orange. And sometimes he carries me, but he doesn't burn. Sometimes I fall off, though."

"What happens then?"

"I fall. Then the shadow-man laughs and tries to catch me, but I never let him, 'cuz of his teeth, so he flies away too."

"Have you had that dream more than once?"

She nodded.

"Tell me another one."

"I don't like the one about the star-man—he's too loud." Carol Anne made a disapproving face. "But I like the tree-man part a lot, except when the fire-man burns him up. That makes me sad. That's when everyone starts crying."

"Who's everyone?"

"All the people in the funny clothes like in Gramma's . . . scrapbook." She smiled up at her mother; Diane smiled back.

Bremer continued to coax her. Carol Anne went on to describe an elaborate dream world of good and bad creatures—beings shaped like flames, like leaves, like star clusters, like darkness. The creatures played with her, chased her, ignored her, threatened her. And there was something else—something she wouldn't talk about. Something that made her stop talking.

At the end of the hour, Dr. Bremer sat back with a look of contemplative satisfaction. "Well, I think we've covered a lot of ground this time. I'd like you to make an appointment for, oh, a few days from now, we can get the testing started at that time."

"Well . . . what do you think?" Diane felt perplexed, but hopeful.

"I think she'll come along just fine." He smiled broadly. "Over the course of the next couple weeks we'll differentiate these episodes, characterize them—true somnambulism versus auto-hypnosis, or epilepsy . . ."

"Epilepsy!"

"Please, don't be alarmed. I don't think this is epilepsy, but we'll find out for sure. And even on the off chance it is, Mrs. Freeling, chances are we can completely control it with medications." He wore his earnest face again.

"Well . . . thank you," Diane said a little breathlessly as she stood to go. "Say thank you, Carol Anne."

"Thank you," she peeped.

"Thank *you*, young lady," said the doctor. "You have the most interesting dreams."

When Diane got home, she made both of them lunch. She wasn't

certain how she felt about Bremer's pronouncements—the session had left her both depressed and excited—but at least she was doing something. That was the main thing. Carol Anne was getting help.

She spent the next hour cleaning up the bedroom. Shards of glass covered the floor where pictures had fallen and shattered. White flakes from the acoustic ceiling stuck to the rug in patches, already settling into the pile.

And E. Buzz was no help. The shaggy golden retriever seemed convinced that he and Diane were playing a fantastic game of Run-around-behind-Diane-and-try-to-Eat-Her-Shoe-When-She-Was-Bending-Over-and-Then-Run-Away-and-Then-Do-It-Again. Diane was playing a good game, but E. Buzz was winning.

At half-time Diane sat on the floor against the dresser and had a smoke. E. Buzz lay on the bed, but Diane was too worn out to yell him off. Then as she was finishing her Virginia Slim, something funny happened. E. Buzz sat right up on the bed, faced the wall, and growled. Growled at nothing.

"E. Buzz, whatever are you up to now?"

The dog bared his teeth, kept growling.

Diane got up and walked over to the wall the retriever was so concerned with. Nothing there. Just the blank wall above the headboard, still carrying its five-year-old, dirty white paint job, not a . . . wait, there was something new. A spot, high on the wall; more a stain, the size of a quarter. Brownish—it looked almost textured. She touched it: no residue, but when she sniffed her finger, it had a cloying, musty smell. The dog barked, and backed away.

Diane tried to rub the stain off with a damp cloth, but it wouldn't come. She tried Ajax on a sponge, and then vinegar with a brush. She couldn't remove the stain; she couldn't even lighten it. E. Buzz watched the entire operation with suspicion.

Suddenly the dog changed his stance, though without apparent reason. Still staring at the spot on the wall, he stopped growling and began to wag his tail. He sat up, and extended his paw to be shaken. He jumped to the floor, barked twice, rolled over, and sat in place, his tail wagging; his eyes were bright, fixed to the wall.

Diane stared at this remarkable display, totally nonplussed. "E. Buzz, what has gotten *into* you?"

Her own words made her vaguely uncomfortable, though, so she refrained from further comment. E. Buzz ran from the room.

She followed the dog downstairs to the kitchen. By the time she got there, he was barking vociferously at one of the kitchen chairs, which

was leaning precariously on two legs against the dishwasher. Beneath it, on the floor, was an overturned open bottle of strawberry preserves.

"Carol Anne!" Diane shouted.

The little girl emerged from the pantry.

"Did you spill that jelly on the floor, young lady?" her mother demanded.

Carol Anne shook her head.

To Diane, lying was the worst sin. And between the mess in the bedroom, the dog acting up, this jam on the floor, the unwanted pool . . . her nerves were stretched thin. So she grabbed Carol Anne by the arm, and gave the child a good swift swat on the rear. Tears filled the girl's eyes.

"Don't you ever try to cover up with lies," Diane scolded. "Lying is much worse than spilled jelly."

She stormed into the broom closet and got a sponge mop to clean up the mess. When she came back into the kitchen a moment later, though, she let the mop clatter to the floor and, for just a second, she lost her breath.

All six kitchen chairs were piled in a neat pyramid atop the table, reaching clear up to the ceiling. Carol Anne stood motionless beside the sink, right where Diane had just left her. Her eyes were wide with wonder.

Diane looked from Carol Anne to the chairs, and back again. "The TV people?" she asked quietly.

Carol Anne nodded tentatively: she didn't want to be accused of lying again. "Uh huh," she said.

Diane tried to remain calm, to keep the tremor out of her voice. She knew the thing a child feared most was fear in a parent. "Can you see them, sweetheart?"

"Uh uh," Carol Anne whispered. She could see her mother was upset, but was uncertain why. Maybe the television people should be spanked.

"Are you afraid?" Diane asked.

"Uh uh," Carol Anne answered quickly. She had learned her lesson: she would not lie.

Diane relied on what she saw as a fund of natural wisdom in her little girl—she relied on it, and took many cues from the child's reactions. So: if Carol Anne wasn't scared now, Diane felt that was probably pretty good evidence why she shouldn't be scared.

“Okay, sweetheart, Mommy’s going to put the chairs back, and then we’ll see if we can talk to the TV people. Okay?”

Carol Anne nodded and smiled. It was a game, after all.

E. Buzz walked in carefully, sniffed the floor, growled, then ran outside with his tail down and ears flat back.

“And here we have the guest bathroom.” Steve smiled invitingly.

Mr. and Mrs. Laird each peeked into the spotless, barren cubicle, then accompanied Steve into the spotless, barren kitchen.

“You live in this area yourself, I understand,” Mr. Laird commented.

“Absolutely,” nodded Steve. “We were the first family to move in. In fact, this property we’re looking at now is the identical design to my own home.”

“They do all seem to have a sameness about them,” Mrs. Laird said a bit dubiously.

“Well, there are four basic types, actually.” Steve felt a little on the defensive with this buyer; he wasn’t sure why. Something in her tone. “And we have extremely liberal building codes—very easy to build additions if you want.”

They walked through the downstairs hall. Mrs. Laird tapped on the walls. “Sound like they’re hollow,” she muttered.

“Let me show you the upstairs.” Steve tried to sound ingratiating as they started the climb.

“Doesn’t look like many people live in this area yet,” Mr. Laird said in a rising voice.

“No, this is the newest area of development—Phase Four. Believe me, it won’t be long, though, before Phase Four is just as populated as Phase One, down where I live—you won’t be able to tell ’em apart.”

“I can hardly tell them apart now,” Mrs. Laird said under her breath.

Steve took them into the master bedroom, opened the windows for them, showed them the view: quiet, rolling hills.

“Smells like rain,” said Laird.

“This way,” Steve replied. Down the hall, into the rear bedrooms. “At our place, we use this one for the kids’ room.”

Mrs. Laird entered, tested the lights, opened the closet door. She nodded her first approval: “Big closets.”

Dr. Martha Lesh sat in her lab at U.C. Irvine going over data. She was

sixty-one years old and wore her hair tight, making her appear to be a severe woman, but she was not severe.

She was actually rather warm, once her reserved facade was broken; yet here, in her laboratory, reserve was the face she maintained—everything seemed to run more efficiently because of it. She was used to manipulating environments with her manner, though: her training was in psychiatry, and she'd been a full professor for over ten years.

Her interests had shifted over time, from traditional psychology to parapsychology, the study of paranormal phenomena—ESP, psychokinesis, precognition, reincarnation—it all fell under her purview now. Parapsychology was an umbrella field, encompassing things she believed, things she did not, things she redefined every time their subject arose. For example, she was convinced—had proved to herself in her experiments—that extrasensory perception was a real, if unelucidated, phenomenon: information transfer across some variety of electromagnetic field, at some unknown frequency and wavelength. Psychokinesis she had more difficulty with—to move physical objects at a distance required (to her way of thinking) a greater energy source than was demonstrable or even imaginable in the human mind. Still, she had not ruled PK out—her favorite quote was by the astronomer Fred Hoyle; *The universe is not only stranger than we imagine, it is stranger than we can imagine*. Dr. Lesh had this quote taped to the wall over her desk.

Even so, there were things she didn't accept. She didn't believe in reincarnation, for instance—for reincarnation necessarily postulated the migration of the soul, and Dr. Lesh didn't believe in such a thing as a soul. She believed in science.

But she also believed in people, and that softened her core. She viewed her research as investigation into human resources as much as inquiry, into the nature of the universe. "The scientist with the heart of gold," Marty called her.

Marty Lewandowski was the chief lab technician, busily tinkering with the electroencephalograph behind Dr. Lesh now. Marty was twenty-three, thought of himself as a cool dude, and didn't believe in much of anything but his bi-monthly paycheck. Not that he disbelieved in Lesh's experiments—he just didn't really care all that much. It was a nice place to work, though—he was into all the electronics, the people were pretty mellow, the hours were fairly flexible, there were always lots of cute grad students floating around. And Martha was a real human being to work for.

"Out of ink in Lead Eight, Doc," he called to her back. "How should we interpret that?"

“Just fill it—that’s in your job description, isn’t it?” She smiled without looking up from her papers. They enjoyed teasing each other

“You going over the Tangina transcripts?” he asked.

“Mm hmm. I think a real pattern is emerging, too—whenever she scores high on the psi tests, her EEG demonstrates a statistically significant preponderance of . . .”

“Alpha waves, right?”

“Yes, alpha, but we’ve known that more or less all along. What I see here—and much more so, now that I’m looking for it—is PGO activity. The ponto-geniculo-occipital spikes.”

“Same as you see during REM sleep?”

“Exactly—that’s what makes this finding even more exciting—it seems to suggest that psi phenomena may be related to the dreaming state—which is, of course, anecdotally, what people have always said.”

Ryan walked in and sat down. “You’re not talkin’ about voodoo again, I hope,” he laughed, dumping his books on the table. Ryan Mitchell was one of Dr. Lesh’s grad students. He was bright, energetic, and opinionated. Like Lesh, he’d seen telepathy demonstrated in the lab; unlike her, he generally scoffed at all the rest—for its lack of hard evidence, for the fools and charlatans that glutted the field.

But Ryan was no cynic, merely a skeptic. He maintained rigorous standards of proof, and all things that failed to meet these standards were highly suspect; were, in fact, unworthy, if not totally worthless. A *priori*, of all things he was skeptical. However, once a phenomenon *did* pass his discriminating evaluations, did *not* wither under his scrutiny, held *strong* under the eye of the impartial observer—then Ryan Mitchell believed, and would stand behind that belief against all onslaught.

Unfortunately, most “proofs” of paranormal phenomena failed to meet his strict criteria.

Ryan was convinced, for example, that Tangina was faking.

“Marty was talking about ink,” said Dr. Lesh. “I was talking about Tangina’s EEG.”

“I think we ought to cut her loose,” Ryan went on. “Really, Martha, she’s just jerkin’ our chain.”

“I don’t think so, Ryan. For two reasons. One—I was just telling Marty—is that I’m starting to see a real pattern in her EEG. Here, look at these PGO spikes—they fire each time the transcript was positive for a behaviorally paranormal experience.” Ryan examined the tracings. Lesh continued. “The other reason I don’t think she’s faking

is that she's so upset. She hardly believes in some of these experiences herself—she'd certainly like to be rid of them, and furthermore, would never even have come to us if her sister hadn't insisted she get 'cured.' No, I think Tangina's the real thing."

"She's the real thing, all right," Ryan said sarcastically.

"What's up for tonight?" asked Marty.

"Tonight we put it all together," Lesh said, taking off her glasses, rubbing her eyes. "EEG monitoring, evoked potentials, electromagnetic field analysis, and visuals—first under hypnosis, then during sleep."

"Well—I think we're wasting our time. But what the hell—it's only my education."

"It's only my life, Mr. Mitchell," said Tangina from the doorway.

There was a moment of uncomfortable silence as the three scientists wondered how long she'd been standing there listening. This happened to Tangina not uncommonly, though—these uncomfortable silences. She was a dwarf.

"Ryan meant no insult, Tangina," Dr. Lesh intervened. "He was a born skeptic. It's only his way of being . . . scientific."

"Frankly, doctors, I'm not interested in whether you believe in my powers or not—as long as you find a way to stop my dreams."

"We'll do what we can," Dr. Lesh said gently. "That's all I can promise you."

Cumulus clouds were matting the sky once more as Steve drove home Monday evening. He hoped it wouldn't be another screamer, as Sunday's had been. They could all use a good night's sleep tonight.

He groaned as he swung the Country Squire around the last corner and pulled up to his driveway: three garbage cans blocked the entrance.

"Kids," he muttered, as he stopped the car, got out, and began to move the obstacles. Diane came running out the front door before he d cleared them off.

"Hey, sugar," he called out. "Guess who just bought P-4 237 . . ."

"C'mere. Hurry," she panted, grabbing his wrist.

"Whoa, wait a sec, I'm parked in the street." He'd never seen her like this. She looked pale and flushed at the same time.

"Leave it. Come quick, before it stops again."

She pulled him at a trot into the house, down the hall, into the kitchen. Sweat covered her forehead; there was a sense of

concentrated hysteria about her that Steve had never witnessed: she was right on the edge.

"Babe, what is it, you look . . ."

"Okay, okay . . . look. Okay. Now listen. Robbie and Dana are eating at the Sandersons—I've kept them out of it, but Carol Anne's been in on it from the beginning, but Dana would just start to blab or get embarrassed and Robbie'd be up for the next three weeks sleeping on your side of the bed, and . . ."

"Diane, put the brakes on, will you? Just sit down here a sec, and tell me . . ."

"No, goddammit, you sit down!" She shouted much louder than either of them expected, and it startled them both. She lowered her voice, and went on. "I mean . . . just stand right there. And just . . . just have an open mind."

Carol Anne walked in, looking cranky. In her hand she carried a San Diego Charger football helmet; on her face she carried a frown. "I'm hungry," she whined. "Mommy didn't made dinner."

"We'll go to Pizza Hut, all right?" Diane shouted. She caught herself again, made herself calm down.

For the first time, Steve noticed the chalk marks on the floor. Arrows, squares, numbers, like alien hieroglyphics. He had the sudden, sinking fear that Diane was losing her mind.

"Diane—what is going *on* with you!?"

Diane's lip trembled, her breathing quickened, but she held up her hands as if to say, "I'm fine." Then, with a sense of purpose that would not be undermined by the unreality of the situation, she grabbed a kitchen chair and placed it in the center of the floor, each leg within a circle of chalk.

"Okay," she whispered loudly, as if she possessed a huge, psychotic secret. "Okay, now, watch! Watch! Ready? Watch!"

She let go of the chair, and stepped aside. Her eyes remained fixed on the piece of furniture. Steve's eyes oscillated between the chair and Diane. He started to walk toward her, but she held her hands up and almost shouted: "Stop! Look!"

He watched in disbelief as the chair began to tremble. More and more it vibrated, until it started moving forward—slowly at first, then picking up speed until it shot completely across the floor and stopped in front of Steve.

Diane's eyes widened in a grin of hysterical victory. Carol Anne yawned and rubbed her eyes.

Steve kneeled by the chair, felt for wires, checked for magnets.

Nothing. He looked up at Diane, his eyebrows furrowed in question.

“It’s okay, it’s okay,” she grinned feverishly, ready to share her secret now. “Look. Carol Anne, show Daddy.”

“I’m hungry,” the child grumped.

“Don’t argue!” Diane snapped.

Carol Anne saw discussion was futile. She put on the football helmet and sat down inside a large chalk circle near the sink. Steve walked toward the girl, but Diane held him back. All at once, Carol Anne began to tremble.

Just like the chair, she vibrated for a few seconds, and then shot across the floor into Diane’s waiting arms.

“Oww, that burned,” Carol Anne complained, rubbing her butt. “I don’t want to play anymore.”

“Well?” Diane rasped at Steve triumphantly

“What the fuck is this?”

“You try!” Diane looked almost possessed.

“What?”

“You won’t *believe* what it feels like.”

“Okay, so what’s the gag? Where’s the magnet?” He looked behind the kitchen door. He looked under the sink. He looked at Diane and yelled with helpless belligerence: “I hate Pizza Hut! I hate surprises! And I don’t understand what the hell’s going on around here!”

Diane almost wept to find out she wasn’t imagining it all, to find out Steve was just as mystified as she was. “I knew I couldn’t possibly explain it to you—you’d have thought I was nuts. So I showed you instead. But don’t ask me how, or what, or how—just help me figure out what to do.”

It began to dawn on Steve. “You mean . . . there’s no gimmick?” he whispered.

“Not from in here. Maybe someone’s getting cute with some big new generator out there or something . . .”

“What are you talking about, generator—what kind of generator could . . .”

“How should I know? I’m no electrician.”

“I wonder if what happened last night could have anything to do with this.”

“No shit.”

“Yeah, some kind of disturbance in . . .”

“Daddy, Daddy!” Carol Anne called out—she’d inadvertently walked

across one of the chalk arrows, and was now sailing full-tilt across the kitchen floor.

Steve opened his arms just in time to catch her, whereupon she giggled furiously, as if he'd thrown her into the air himself.

"Now can we get pizza?" she asked.

"Evening, Ben."

"Freeling. Ms. Freeling."

The three of them stood on Tuthill's back porch. The two men kept their hands in their pockets; Diane kept her arms folded.

"TV's off in here. If your set's acting up again . . ."

"No, no, uh uh. Nothing like that. We were wondering . . . although this is going to sound strange coming from me . . ."

"I doubt it," muttered Tuthill.

A moment of awkward silence. The Freelings stared at their feet, getting more embarrassed by the second.

"You been noticing anything . . . funny, lately?" Steve broached the subject uncomfortably. What he didn't want most of all was for his jerk neighbor to think he was going around the bend.

"Funny like what? Funny ha-ha or funny strange?"

"Like . . . disturbances," Diane tried to explain.

"You mean like . . . vandalism?" Tuthill looked perplexed. Moreover, he began to look suspicious: he'd moved to Cuesta Verde to get away from all the nuts and yo-yos in the city—why did he seem to find them wherever he went?

Steve was sorry he'd ever come. Diane tried to sound supremely casual. "Oh, like dishes of furniture moving around by themselves?"

* * *

"I don't care, we've just got to keep this thing in the family," Steve said quietly but firmly. "Did you see the look on Tuthills face? We're lucky he didn't call the wagon then and there."

He sat in bed beside Diane later that night, feeling foolish and confused. She looked at him dubiously. He pursed his lips. "All right, then. In the morning I'll call someone in."

"Call someone in?" she whispered. "Who, for instance? I've already checked the Yellow Pages. Furniture movers we got already. Maybe if we looked under weird happenings . . ."

"Okay, okay." Steve held up his hands. "I have a plan. I have a plan.

Something's occurring here that we can't explain. I just feel ridiculous . . ."

"There's nothing to feel ridiculous about . . ."

"Well, how the hell did *you* feel with Tuthill staring at us like we'd lost our marbles? What do you think Teague would say if Tuthill mentioned something?"

Thunder rolled in from the west, momentarily flickering the image on the television screen. Diane smiled. "He'd probably say you'd lost your marbles."

"So what do you want to do? Call an exorcist? The police? A seismologist? What?"

"Don't be stupid, Steven. Besides, you just said we should keep it in the family."

"Right. Okay. Let's wake the kids. No big deal. Let's wake them, spend the night at the Travel Lodge, and not come home until it's safe."

"Now you're scaring me. Don't try to scare me, Steven."

"I'm not trying to scare you. I'm trying to unscare me. Look, it's probably just the weather. It's this weird electrical activity. Maybe everything's magnetized."

"The weather, huh? Magnets, huh?" Madness in her eye. "What's this, then?" She stood up in bed and pointed to the strange stain high on the wall. It was bigger now.

"It's a spot," Steve suggested.

"A spot. A spot that wasn't there yesterday. A spot our dog has been fixating on since this morning. A spot I can't . . ."

"All right, all right. Now *you're* trying to scare *me*!"

They stared at each other in frazzled silence a moment, then burst into nervous laughter.

"What the hell." Steve shook his head. "Probably that lightning hit the damn wall last night, and we're all electric zombies now."

Diane laughed until she was near tears, and curled in his arms. "I'm sure there's a perfectly natural explanation. I lived with it all day, and nothing bad happened. It's just another side of nature. A side we're simply not qualified to comprehend. We're just overreacting--we've made everything much too important."

"You're probably right," he agreed then paused. "The whole thing is just so damn weird."

Robbie lay grimly in bed, under the covers, watching the tree backlit

by stark spears of lightning.

"One . . . two . . . three . . . four . . . five . . ." he whispered. Ominously, the thunder mumbled in its ancient, throaty language.

Outside, the tortured branches of the oak pounded and scraped the window under the tormenting gale. The sky was a gray, black shroud.

Another streak of lightning fired the air. Somewhere, a power line must have bent under the force: the closet night light flickered, and went out.

"One . . . two . . . three . . ."

A great boom and rumble shook the house, rattled the glass. The wind keened like a mourner, and in the next ignition of lightning pulled the branches of the tree forward with terrible meaning.

"One . . . two . . ."

BADOOM! The building seemed to cringe. Carol Anne tossed fitfully in the other bed, as Robbie lay absolutely motionless under the covers —hoping the tree-monster wouldn't see him.

The wind rose to gale force. Ozone suffused the air like after-burn. Lightning seared the night once more, accompanied simultaneously by a monumental CRASH, and a blast of wind. The giant oak appeared to become apoplectic—like a tortured creature, it twisted forward, thrusting its grotesque limbs out . . . until with a tremendous gust of rain and crashing glass, the limbs burst through the window, into the bedroom. Robbie screamed.

Carol Anne jumped awake, as another chorus of lightning turned the night into a raging cold furnace. Long, fingerlike twigs at the end of the great branches tangled the screaming boy like rotting skeleton hands—and as the tree swayed in the wind, lifted him out of bed.

Carol Anne started to scream. The rest of the family ran through the bedroom door just in time to see the engulfing tree-arms yank the boy up and out the broken window into the demented night. Diane gave an anguished shout, barely heard over the roar of the storm. After one paralyzed instant, the three of them—Dana, Steve, and Diane—ran out of the bedroom and tore downstairs, leaving Carol Anne where she was.

The kitchen door was blocked by falling debris, so they had to run around the side to the patio. Steve slid open the glass door, and they rushed out into the weather. They were immediately soaked, and buffeted by the eighty-mile-per-hour gale. As they looked up into the straining knobbly tree, they could barely see Robbie tossed and trapped in its topmost branches. In the surreal light of the electrical discharges, the boy looked as if he were being eaten alive. Steve began

to climb.

Upstairs, Carol Anne huddled in terror against the headboard of her bed, held there partly by the velocity of the wind rushing through the shattered window. Dumbly, she stared at the half-open closet door. The light in the closet was growing brighter.

Horribly bright, with almost nuclear intensity, the sick-white hue of a neutron star. The color of television light.

Carol Anne screamed, but no sound came from her mouth. The terrible wind began spinning loose objects across the room, in frenzied vortices, into the glare of the closet. Then, slowly, larger objects started to move—chairs, radios, pillows moved inexorably toward the open closet, as if they were being inhaled, and swallowed. Carol Anne hugged the clown doll, but it only smiled.

The bed began to move.

Carol Anne dug her fingers into the mattress, screaming, crying, nearly unhinged with fear.

But she didn't begin to know fear until she heard the wail of the Beast. It was a low, insane sound, a sound unlike anything she'd ever heard, the sound of bedlam. The Beast in the closet.

It covered the sound of the storm. It pulled Carol Anne's bed toward the light.

Battered by a wall of wind, Steve finally reached Robbie. The boy was being strangled by an increasingly constricting tangle of twigs and vine. Steve felt almost as if he were drowning. Rain lashed him. Each time he extricated one of Robbie's arms or hands, another would become enmeshed in the slippery lattice.

Diane was halfway up the tree herself by this time, trying to help free the others. They all kept slipping, though—the bark was covered with some saplike ooze that made traction impossible. It almost smelled like blood.

Dana watched from below, wringing her hands and desperately wishing them all free.

Everything in the room was being drawn into the cyclonic vortex of the closet. Carol Anne was lifted off the bed, but hung onto the bending frame, flapping like a flag in a hurricane. Unbelievably, the clown was not affected. It just sat on the floor where Carol Anne had dropped it, staring up, smiling, as the wind tore at her. Finally she could hold no more, and, with the slenderest vacuum noise, was slammed into the brilliant hole.

A moment later the bed gave way, flipped into the air, and flew across the room, smashing the closet door shut with Carol Anne inside, and barricading it against being reopened.

Steve tore violently at the myriad branches that enveloped Robbie, as the wind rose to maniac heights. Then, with a final thunderous explosion of light, all three—Steve, Robbie, and Diane—were thrown to the ground. Moments later, the entire tree was uprooted with a single loud crunch, and sucked into the demon night.

And suddenly the storm stopped.

The four Freelings lay in a pile on the muddy earth, numb, buzzing, spent.

Suddenly Dana pointed to the horizon and shouted: “Look, Mom . . . Dad!”

They followed the line of her finger to the distance. It was a receding funnel cloud, just beginning to break up in the outlying hills.

“A night twister!” Dana marveled.

“It must have just skimmed us,” Diane nodded. “There wouldn’t be a house standing here if . . .”

“Carol Anne!” shouted Steve.

“Still upstairs?” They all looked at the shattered upstairs window.

“My God!” Diane spoke softly.

They ran into the house, but when they reached the children’s bedroom, they froze. Except for the two beds blocking the closet, and a few toys and broken bits of furniture, the room was stripped clean. Barren.

Diane shrieked once, then she and Steve immediately started pulling at the junk. Robbie and Dana stood voicelessly in the doorway watching. E. Buzz whimpered at their feet.

“Carol Anne!” Diane called, but there was no answer.

They removed the last piece of debris, and pulled open the closet door.

The closet was empty.

“She’s not here!” Steve shouted. He was almost beside himself.

“Carol Anne!” Diane called out. She ran to the broken window and called again.

“I’ll check the kitchen!” said Dana.

“Don’t go in there!” Steve warned. “I’ll check it. You look in our room.”

"I'll go." Diane's voice came in a rasp. "You look in the bathrooms."

They all ran out. All but Robbie, who simply stood, staring feverishly into the empty closet . . . empty, but for the stain high on the wall it shared with his parents' bedroom. A stain in the shape of some kind of . . . thing. And far back in the corner, doubled over and grinning outrageously at him: the clown doll.

Steve ran into the kitchen. The television was on, but the local transmitter must have been down—only static snow could be seen on the screen.

"Carol Anne!" he shouted.

Dana went into the downstairs bathroom. "Carol!" she called. No answer. The shower curtain was closed—she drew it back quickly: nothing there.

Diane went through the master bedroom, the bathroom; looked in the closet, under the bed. Every exposed corner left her a little more frantic. "Oh Jesus Christ Almighty. *Carol Anne*!" The television hissed white static on the end table.

Steve entered. "This is crazy. I've looked everywhere."

Suddenly, realization dawned on Diane's face. "Oh my God. The swimming pool."

They broke into a run. Dana joined them in the hallway as they headed downstairs. Slowly Robbie emerged from his bedroom and walked into his parents' room. Tensely, he stood in front of the television set.

Dana, Steve, and Diane raced to the edge of the newly dug pool. The rain had softened the perimeter, though, and Dana's feet began to slide with the shifting mud. The next second she was standing in the deep end, waist high in mud and rainwater.

Steve ran in after her, and the two of them began plunging their hands into the quagmire, looking for the body. Diane sat down hard on the edge, just weeping and shaking her head. Her strength had reached its low tide.

Robbie faced the picture tube, inches away, the bluish video glow flattening his features and his affect. For many minutes he lingered like that, then recognition flickered behind his eyes.

Something registered. He squinted, first with half-awareness, then with growing terror, into the screen. Shadows. Whispers.

An inarticulate moan passed his lips. Then he screamed. "Mommmmmmy!! Mommy! Mommy! Mommy! Mommy!"

The sound of her child's shout jerked Diane's head up like a marionette on a string. In an instant she was on her feet, slipping over the ground, running into the house and up the stairs.

When she reached the landing at the top of the staircase, she heard Carol Anne's voice call out faintly from her bedroom. Diane's heart jumped with relief, momentarily—her baby was here. Hurt, maybe, but essentially safe. She redoubled her speed into the bedroom.

In the bedroom, Robbie stared into the television static. He was hysterical, holding his hair in his fists. Diane grabbed him and pulled his face up to hers.

"What is it?" she strained. "Oh my Christ, what is it?"

The static hiss on the television grew louder. Insubstantial images played across its face. Somewhere in the distance, a small voice filtered through: "Mommy . . ."

Diane turned white as snow. "Carol Anne! Where are you?!" Frantically, she searched the room once more.

"Mommy . . . Mommy . . ." The voice was faint, waxed; barely audible over the hiss of the television. E. Buzz crept into the room and growled at the set.

"Mommy . . ." repeated the voice. There was no doubt about it. The voice was Carol Anne's. But where, in God's name, was she hiding?

"I'm here, baby! Oh God, baby, I'm here!" Diane wept hysterically, stumbling around the room in circles.

Almost catatonic, Robbie walked back to the television. "Mommy. Over here."

Diane looked at her son and froze. Her face contorted with foreknowledge. Gray shapes moved fleetingly across the television screen, indistinct blurs; and then the voice came again, Carol Anne's voice, distorted uncannily through the noise of the blue-white static: "I can't see you, Mommy. Mommy. Where are you?"

Staring at the television with greater comprehension than she could tolerate, Diane was overcome by a choking nausea; a falling, as if into madness. Her eyes rolled back, and she lost consciousness.

CHAPTER 3

Tangina Barrons was fifty-two, on the plump side, bespectacled; tended to dress in floral chiffons, and ordinarily wore her thin hair up in a tight bun. For most of her life, she'd had dreams. Special dreams.

As a child they had taken the form of nightmares. *Pavor nocturnis*, the doctor called it—night terror. She would be pulled from sleep each night with a moan of horror on her lips, moaning until her mother or her sister shook her awake. When they asked her what the dream had been about, she never remembered—there was only a black amnesia, deathly, opaque.

Around the age of ten, she stopped having the dreams. That development was met with great relief by Tangina and her family. She went through a quiescent period for a couple years—a happy time for her. Then, when she was twelve, her parents died in a train wreck—and Tangina dreamed about the wreck the night it happened. From then on, she found she was prescient.

She dreamed things before they happened—or at least, as they happened. Frequently, the dreams concerned people she knew, though not always. She became extremely close to her sister during the following years, as they were shuttled from orphanage to foster home, and much of Tangina's second sight revolved around that beloved sibling. The second sight was alternately a gift and a curse, at first—these glimpses of the future, or of the displaced Now—but gradually Tangina simply learned to take it for granted. Some people could hear in higher registers than other people. Tangina took her second sight for what it was: that she could see in higher registers.

It was only during the last ten years or so, however, that she began having knowledge of other worlds. Not actually other planets in the universe, she thought—though for all she knew, they might be—but more like other dimensions, other planes of existence, other levels of spirit, somehow disjunct from this mortal coil. And just like those of her early childhood, these dreams scared her.

Not always, but usually. They involved running, more often than not. Either she herself was running, or her sister was, or some unknown unfortunate. What was chasing was less clear still: forms without shape, usually; gloating presences, shades of meaning.

The dreams were unsettling, at best, and Tangina would just as soon have seen them disappear. But they didn't. In fact, they lingered in the

corners of her consciousness even during waking, at times. These were states of special perception visions, nothing less. They allowed her, among other things, to “read” people in ways that were invisible to most—read their souls, their multiplicities of spirit.

Since it was an ability over which she had no control, Tangina decided, in the end, to make use of it—to help people, if she could. She became a reluctant clairvoyant.

Reluctant, because the episodes of vision left her so drained, and because once she opened one of her special doors, she couldn’t close it again at will: once she tried to see, she had to see, whether she wanted to or not. There was no eye-closing, and she couldn’t leave, once the show started.

Consequently, Tangina was at the end of her tether. Ten years of witnessing and isolating other people’s horrors and losses had almost burned her out. She’d been hired by frantic parents to find missing children, by stumped police departments to find disemboweled corpses, by grieving widows to contact lost loves. But they couldn’t pay her enough to do that anymore—she wanted an end to it. She could no longer turn it off.

And moreover, it was getting worse. For many weeks, now, she’d been having dreams that stole her sleep, left her tired and sweating in the morning. They were precognitive, of that she was certain—unfortunately, they slipped from her consciousness within seconds of awakening.

That made the experience even more frustrating—the fact that she remembered the dreams for scant moments, but then lost them like water through a sieve during the brief time it took her to wake fully, leaving her damp with memory.

Nor was that even the worst of it. Things, objects in her room—and she was not certain of any of this, which made it worse still—were moving. Not moving unmistakably or visibly, but each morning Tangina was aware, or thought she was aware, of something in one spot in the room, which the previous evening had been in another spot. A chair, moved out a bit from the wall; a book, shifted from table to dresser.

Psychokinesis was one thing she’d never experienced before. Not that she disbelieved in it; only, if this was it, the experience was new to her. But the incidents were so vague, so vaguely unsettling—she wondered if she could be losing her mind. Nothing, she’d come to learn—not even insanity—was impossible.

Her days were filled with premonition and dread. She wondered at the import of every encounter. Was the mailman’s song a portent? The

scrap of paper that caught on her shoe, a token? Her world had become a place of foreboding; it gave her no rest.

Since her resolve was to give up augury and divination insofar as she could, she tried to suppress the episodes with sleeping pills. For a time, that worked. Her dreams became less frequent, less tormenting. As the medication accumulated in her system, though, she started feeling chronically tired, perpetually drugged. One day she almost stepped in front of a truck, accidentally. She stopped the pills.

The dreams returned with a vengeance. They took over her life, became the nebulous center of a troubled existence.

She decided to approach the problem head-on—to seek the night-visions directly, and deal with them face to face. She decided to "scry."

Scrying was the art of crystal gazing, a technique Tangina, like thousands of seers before her, had perfected as a medium through which to achieve an altered state of consciousness. Not that a crystal ball was necessary *per se*—any reflective or refractive surface would do. The crystal ball was merely a visual point around which the visionary could gather his or her consciousness—as a means of dissociating, or discorporating, or becoming otherwise entranced.

So that is what Tangina did, to try to recapture her dreams. She doused the lights in her apartment—she lived alone, now—sat on the floor of her bedroom, lit a single candle, placed her crystal before it, stared into the dancing point of light.

Her respirations grew shallow; the world around her faded; she melded with the light in the glass. And, as she had so often before, found herself on a different plane, in a different dimension.

It was steamy here, in this rift of the universe. Indistinct. Shapeless horrors tracked her, hovering in the fog. Nothing was clear enough to confront.

Tangina tried to rise above the steaminess, but was prevented by a numbness that pressed down on her at each attempt. She delved into it, but it grew thicker; movement became difficult.

Something grew near her; she could not sense what it was. She ran, almost without volition—she neither wanted to stop, nor did she get the feeling that she was able to. There were no limits to the place she was in, yet she felt smothered by its closeness.

She chased a dim figure; it eluded her. Mist filled her: the mist was chill, and alive, and created a diffuse hopelessness about all things. It sustained itself on her life force, and even grew stronger, at her expense. Her spirit began to dwindle under its nameless breath.

Tangina returned to her body. Totally exhausted now, and no wiser for all her trials, she was at a loss as to how to proceed. She'd tried doctors, faith healers, potions, and priests. No one could rid her of her uninvited dreams. So, as a last resort, she turned to the Psychic Society.

Not a last resort because she doubted the members' abilities—though some people there, to be sure, were con artists and showmen—but because she'd vowed to stay away from other psychics, as a way of reinforcing her own resolution to close off that part of her life.

She showed up at the Society's monthly meeting with no thought in mind other than to talk to a few old friends, to see if anyone had any ideas about how to solve her problem. To her surprise, there was a guest speaker that night—Dr. Martha Lesh, a scientist from the university, talking about her research in parapsychology.

Scientists, on the whole, didn't interest Tangina. She had no stake in proving her abilities to anyone—rather, she felt the opposite, at the present. Still, this Lesh seemed to be a kind soul—Tangina read the aura easily—and after the lecture, the two women gravitated to each other fairly quickly.

The significance of such instantaneous gravitation was not lost on Tangina, and intrigued her even more with the possibilities this doctor presented.

"I think," Tangina said right at the beginning, "you and I are already bound up together. We share the same path for a time."

Dr. Lesh smiled. "A common destiny?"

"I shrink from words like *destiny*," Tangina mused. "Except in *Moby Dick*. Call it, rather, a presage."

"It sounds ominous, I'm afraid."

Other members were milling around the two women, trading stories, drinking wine. They moved off to a corner.

"Not necessarily ominous," said Tangina. "But I do have dreams."

"So do we all."

"Not like mine. Mine are . . . prophetic."

"What do they prophesy?"

"I don't know. That's part of the problem."

"And the other part?"

"I can't stop them. They won't let me be."

"Have you had this problem before?" Lesh was becoming intrigued herself, by this arcane midget. She hadn't known what to expect when the Society had invited her here to talk on her research. She'd come

prepared for anything, though, so she certainly didn't feel let down by Tangina's approach.

"I've had ESP most of my life—precognition, as well. I don't want it anymore, though, Doctor. It takes too much out of me. I've done with warnings. Can you help me?"

"I'm not certain exactly what you want of me.

"It's my dreams."

"Recurring dreams?"

"Yes . . . at least, I think so. They seem to be the same, at any rate. I can't remember them, you see—but I'm certain they're portentous. Or at least, telepathic. However, I wish to be rid of them. Telepathy is my disease. If you can cure me—give me a remission, in any case—you may borrow them."

"Borrow them?" Lesh's first reaction was amusement, but the woman with whom she spoke was not amused.

"Yes. I'll make it a proposal—that is the currency of the scientist, I believe. You may use me—study my brain, register my abilities, measure my prescience, borrow my dreams—only help me, if you can, to draw the curtains on my second sight. For I'm weary to the bone, of knowing."

Dr. Lesh was moved by this plea, but somewhat at a loss for response.

Tangina smiled understandingly, and helped her. "You needn't answer now. You don't know me, of course, and I know you have committees and budgets to answer to. Believe me—I wouldn't have approached you if I hadn't been desperate."

Lesh was a bit defensive at the suggestion that she had to answer to a committee before she could make a research decision. "No, that's not it—there *are* no committees to whom I am answerable in matters such as this. And I make the budgets in our lab . . ."

"Well, then," smiled Tangina. "As I indicated when we first met—our association was practically a foregone conclusion. I only hope it ends profitably for us both." She extended her hand.

With combined bewilderment and inevitability, Lesh shook hands with Tangina. "I'd be happy if it ended profitably for even one of us," the older woman laughed. "And I don't care which one, at this moment." She shook her head then. "Oh dear, I think I'd better have another glass of wine."

So it was Tangina's hope that if an explanation could be found for her condition, a cure could be found as well. It was Lesh's hope that a

condition could be found. They ran tests on Tangina, recorded her dreams, her brain waves, her receptivity to direct and to telepathic suggestion. By the third week, Dr. Lesh felt she was beginning to see a pattern emerge—the PGO activity she'd mentioned to Ryan.

By the third week, Tangina was beginning to despair of ever finding respite from her nightmarish sleep. But she'd made an agreement with Dr. Lesh, and would follow it to its end, no matter how unrewarding she feared it was becoming.

Consequently, she sat quietly in her nightgown now, as Marty meticulously glued electrodes to her scalp, each lead trailing a fine wire that plugged into the wall behind the bed in the observation room. The room was filled with monitoring equipment of every variety—television camera, magnometer, electrostatic locator, infrared camera, high- and low-frequency microphones, electrohygrometer—all pointed at the bed.

"One day I'm gonna wake up fried to a crisp," Tangina muttered to Marty.

"At least we'll get it on tape," he replied lightly.

She gave him a look, but before she could make a comeback, Dr. Lesh entered the room.

"All set?" Dr. Lesh asked.

"Last electrode." Marty stood back and admired his handiwork. "I'll go make an equipment check." He left the room.

"Well," said Dr. Lesh, sitting down on a stool beside the bed. "How are you feeling tonight?"

"Tingly," Tangina replied. She lay back in bed. "What's on tonight's agenda?"

"The same as last week, as far as you're concerned. I'm going to hypnotize you, and suggest that you enter into your maximally receptive state. Then I'll do the same with one of our other subjects—Rita—who we've had some success with in the past—and we'll have Rita try to transmit her thoughts into your dreams during the night. During all of this, we'll be monitoring your brain waves, measuring ambient room ionization, and so on—and then we'll wake you up after each dream, and ask you to recount as much as you can remember into this tape recorder. Any questions?"

"Are we getting anywhere?"

Lesh smiled sympathetically. "Yes, I think we are. Truly. Tonight we'll be tracking some specific functions that I think are beginning to correlate."

"Ah. Correlations."

“We are doing our best, you know.” Lesh felt a little deflated.

Tangina just felt tired. “I’m afraid I’m as skeptical of all this as Ryan is of me.”

“We must trust each other—it’s the only way this will work.”

“Oh, I trust *you*,” Tangina assured her. “It’s your machines I don’t believe in.”

They shared a brief, frustrated, but not-yet-hopeless glance, and settled down to the business at hand. “Well,” said Martha, “why don’t we get started?”

Tangina closed her eyes lightly. Lesh dropped her voice to a monotone, and continued speaking. “Now I’m going to count from one to ten, and I want you to concentrate on the sound of my voice. And as I count higher, you’re going to let yourself become more and more deeply asleep, more relaxed, more receptive. And when I reach ten, you’ll be completely asleep, completely relaxed, completely asleep in the deepest, fullest sleep you’ve ever known, a deep dark sleep. Already, now, you’re aware only of the sound of my voice, only my voice, relaxing you and soothing you, letting you glide into sleep. One . . . starting to get sleepy now, just beginning to feel that sensation wash over you, letting yourself follow the sound of my voice into deeper, darker sleep. Two . . . the higher I count, the deeper you can feel yourself going, now, floating deeper and deeper on the sound of my voice. Three . . .”

Lesh, Marty, and Ryan sat quietly checking readings in the receiving room. Two television monitors showed Tangina and Rita, sleeping soundly in their respective rooms in different sections of the building. Marty fiddled with the Balance and Gain dials on the electroencephalograph, as twelve red pens scratched out Tangina’s brain waves onto the paper that slowly rolled from the machine into a pile on the floor. Lesh studied the tracings. Ryan ran sound checks, zeroed all the gauges.

“How we doin’?”

“Everything as planned. Tangina seems to be in, oh, looks like Stage II sleep now. Rita should be having her first Transmission Dream shortly.”

“Transmission you hope.”

“That’s what we’re here to find out.”

“What’s the subject matter tonight?”

“Let’s see,” said Dr. Lesh. “I told Rita first to dream about the merry-go-round at the circus, then her second dream will be about her

puppy running away, and her third will involve a fight with a policeman. Tangina, of course, I just told to dream' about whatever comes into her mind."

"Ah, but what a mind."

"I wish the Nobel committee could see us now."

"Now there you go, prejudging the experiments," tempered Ryan. "This is empirical research. We observe, we record. If possible, we conclude."

Lesh rubbed her eyes. "I think I'm becoming solipsistic in my old age."

"What's that?" Marty demanded suspiciously. He hated it when she used words he didn't understand.

"It is the theory that only the self exists, or can be proved to exist," she explained. "Everything else, all this—the entire universe—is an invention of the self. Even you, my friend, are only one of my illusions. A ghost of my mind."

"I'm one of your ghosts, huh?" Marty cackled. "That's a laugh." He wiggled his fingers in her face. "Booga booga booga."

"Now Marty there," noted Ryan, essaying his most academic manner, "is an empiricist, I'll wager. He believes all knowledge is derived from experience via the senses. Reality is observed, sensually."

"I'll drink to that," Marty smiled agreeably, lifting his Styrofoam coffee cup to his lips. He was a renowned Lothario, a great champion of the sensual realities.

"And you?" Lesh addressed Ryan.

"Me—I'm a naturalist. I believe all objects and events can be accounted for by scientific explanation. The universe is neither a derivation of the self, nor a function of reason, independent of experience. The universe is . . . what it is."

"What it is, and what it ain't, bro." Marty held out his hand, and Ryan returned him some skin.

"And what it *is*," Ryan continued, "can be explained. And what it ain't, all comes out in the wash."

"And just what is it that it is, Dr. Mitchell?" Dr. Lesh asked jovially.

"It's waves, it's definitely waves," he asserted, half mocking himself, half serious. "Electromagnetic waves."

"It's energy, man," said Marty. "It's all energy. There is no matter. This chair, here, it's just another kind of energy. Atoms, that's just energy, too. You got your dense energy, and you got your dilute energy. This chair, this is your dense energy." He knocked the leg

three times with his knuckles, to demonstrate. “But this light comin’ down here, this is your dilute energy.” He rapped his knuckles three times through the bright air beneath the light bulb hanging from the ceiling. The third time, there was a loud KNOCK. The scientists all jumped.

Lesh looked at the monitor, and laughed. Tangina had just turned in her sleep—the back of her hand had hit the headboard, right under the microphone.

The others shook their heads. Ryan wiped his brow. “For a second, there, I was worried we were all inventions of *Marty’s* mind. What a grim thought.”

“Well, watch your step, pal, or I’ll think up an even grimmer thought, and it’ll eat you alive.”

“Aha, now we have dueling solipsists . . .”

“Wait, look, something’s happening.”

They all looked at the EEG paper flowing unhurriedly under the jiggling pens.

“Stage IV sleep—but you’re right, that *is* odd—there shouldn’t really be spindle activity like that. Marty, check the GSR.”

Marty looked over one of the voltimeters, and shrugged. “No, it corresponds to Stage IV, too.”

“You sure your leads were standardized?”

“What do you mean, *am I sure*?”

“I just mean . . .”

“Hey, look at that!”

They looked at the printout again.

“PGO spikes.”

“PGO activity isn’t so uncommon in Stage IV.”

“But usually only one or two signals—we shouldn’t be seeing this much firing except during REM sleep—when she’s dreaming.”

“Maybe she *is* dreaming.”

“In Stage IV?”

“Sleepwalkers can have a lot of PGO activity in Stage IV. People who get night-terrors, too.”

“Right, it’s like this unnatural electrical activity breaks through during slow sleep . . .”

“There—she just turned, and the PGO’s disappeared. Probably just . . .”

“Holy shit, look at that!”

The pens were going wild. There was suddenly more electrical activity registering on the brainwave patterns than they'd ever seen—and, oddly, during a stage of sleep usually characterized by slow, low-frequency waves. These pens were shooting off the page.

"Check the Evoked Potentials."

Marty pushed some buttons on the computer console; patterns lit up on the screen.

"I've never seen this before." He shook his head.

"Look at the monitor."

They watched the closed-circuit picture of Tangina lying in bed. She looked distressed.

She tossed and struggled in the throes of an unnamed terror. Her face contorted; her fists opened and closed. Perspiration matted her hair to her forehead. Slowly, her mouth opened, as if to scream. But instead, out came a child's voice, high and chill:

"Mommy! I can't see you. Where are you, Mommy?"

Involuntarily, Dr. Lesh shivered.

"*What is that* all about?" whispered Marty.

"Doesn't sound like she's dreaming about any circus, that's for sure."

"Mommy . . . Mommy . . ." whimpered the voice in Tangina's mouth.

"Kind of creepy," said Ryan.

"There's an incredible ion flux in there."

"Look!"

All of a sudden Tangina sat straight up, got out of bed, and walked out of her room. The camera lost track of her; the EEG electrodes pulled free.

The three researchers ran from the control room and down the hall, just in time to see Tangina start down the stairs. Halfway down, they caught up with her, Dr. Lesh in the lead.

"Tangina! Stop!"

The entranced psychic stopped, looked strangely at the three—intensely, as if from a great distance—and then crumpled into Dr. Lesh's arms.

Tangina rose from the nothingness of sleep into the unremembered land that had been haunting her for weeks. The mists were here, still—cloying, frosty. She wandered through the darksome vapors for an

eternity, searching; for what, she knew not. Shapes thickened in the brew, mocked her, evaded her, stifled her breath. Vertigo toyed with her. Vision was coy. Everything meant something else.

She began to slide—her being was caught up in some ether-wind that pulled her, careening, down some ether-corridor . . . and deposited her in some unforeseen place.

A dry place. Luminous, arid, without horizon. It was a relief, at first, this crucible—it parched the damp from her bones, left her bone dry. She drifted for a time here. Expanded. Her vision was endless, here, but there was nothing to see.

After a while, cracks began to appear, as in dessicated clay. She followed these lines, branching, twisting, juiceless. It was a sere place.

Then, far in the distance, she saw steam rising from one of the cracks. Like a solfatara, the vent spumed vaporous gas. She strayed over toward it, sensing. She strayed too close: though the vapor seemed to be rising under pressure, Tangina was sucked into its source as if it were a vacuum pump.

Blackness.

Becoming gray. A place of shadows, moving slaty values that crossed over and against each other, moving constantly; darker here, less dark there, formless, breathless, roving darkness. But then, fleeting, peripheral, a shape emerged. Tangina shrank from it. The shape pursued her.

She tumbled back; it darted behind her. Almost, the shape laughed. She knew a darkness couldn't laugh, yet that was what seemed to be. The shape had name, as well; its name was Sceädu. Tangina knew its name.

Sceädu danced with her. She spun. It approached, she withdrew—it leaped . . . it tried to engulf her. At the last moment, she jumped into it, falling.

Fell through it into another place. A lighter place, open, with clouds above and below. Sceädu was here, too—still dancing, only now more playful, as if he himself were the doorway between these two worlds, and his nature was different on each side. Tangina would have to go through him again to get back to the other side—but he was more elusive now; he would not be had so easily. She moved toward him; he backed sway, laughing.

Another creature appeared. He was an orange flame, vaguely human. He flew; his voice was the voice of a brush fire. His name was Fantabel.

Fantabel danced with Sceädu. They touched, sizzled, parted.

Fantabel became many flames, red, yellow, white. He babbled in his fire-tongue. Sceädu extinguished him. He reappeared in another sector —only now he carried the girl.

A small girl, perhaps five years old, Tangina thought. Carianna? Carolina? A blond girl. She seemed lost, overwrought. Exhilarated, now, too. She soared on Fantabel's arm. She was giddy with fatigue and tension. Fantabel rocketed into the clouds. The girl fell.

The girl kept falling. She didn't really seem to get anywhere, but she continued to fall, ceaselessly, end over end.

A thing like a tree rose up out of the low-lying cloud cover. Like a tree, yet moving. Bark-encrusted, ancient, scleroid, deliberate. It had no name, or Tangina could not fathom it. Fantabel flew down out of the upper clouds, like a meteor, like a brazen comet; flew through the branches of this slow, woody thing—and it burned. Its branch-arms smouldering, twig-hair aflame, it writhed, it groaned in its barkish language. It settled into the fog.

The little girl continued falling.

The mists over the ground dissipated. In the clearing, Tangina saw people—hundreds of people. They walked in all directions, slowly, quickly, without touching, seemingly without even seeing each other. They dressed in clothes of many eras, of different centuries, different cultures. Some wept; many wept. Some laughed, some walked without expression. Some were in pain.

Beyond this gathering, Tangina sensed a light—felt it, rather than saw it—but couldn't place it. Whenever she tried to move toward the light, to characterize it better, it would shift position, delve deeper into the clouds.

And under it all, something evil. The sense of evil made Tangina recoil, made her soul shrivel. She went around its fetid presence, trying to see it, trying not to see it. Every fiber of her being screamed at her to shun this thing. She moved low, edged closer; her spirit winced. She receded.

The girl hit the ground.

Unhurt, the girl picked herself up and began to walk among the countless other walkers. Tangina floated above her, floated into her, merged with her, touched her core.

Lost, scared, wondrous, confused—that is what Tangina felt in the little girl. The girl spoke, and Tangina became her words: "Mommy! I can't see you! Where are you, Mommy?"

Fantabel circled overhead, babbling Fire. Sceädu ate, whole, one of the wandering people, then danced a special phantom dance.

"Mommy . . . Mommy . . ." the girl whimpered; Tangina exuded.

The evil thing congealed in a cloud bank. Its wretchedness was nearly overpowering. It approached—Tangina left the girl, set herself to do battle—but the thing dissipated, and was gone. The girl wandered off.

Sceädu laughed merrily, soundlessly. In a flash, without warning, Tangina jumped into him—he sparkled briefly, like a photon cluster, a broken web of short circuits—and was through him to the other side.

On the other side, all was shadow again, and Sceädu was darkness moving among darknesses. He stalked Tangina, now—this was his darker side, and his design was to envelop her. But she'd become dark-wise, and knew the ways of this land already. A shadow herself, here, she insinuated herself among shadows.

In this place of formless half-tones, she sought absolute blackness to lead her home. For a prolonged, obscure moment, she straggled here, finally reaching the isthmus of void that connected to the arid land. She plunged into the blackness. The blackness went on.

No time, here; no space. Only nothing. Then, without knowing when, or how, Tangina felt herself being spewed out, in a geyser of steam, into the baked, anhydrous ether through which she'd originally passed.

Across this thin, dry incandescence, she returned. She found the wind that had carried her here, and forged mightily against it, inching into the heavy blow, until she attained, at last, the place of dank mists and murky haze whence her journey had begun.

Suddenly, from out of this gloom, a voice arrested her: "Tangina! Stop!"

Paresthesias filtered through her consciousness—tingling extremities, aching limbs. She knew this sensation. She was back in her body.

She opened her eyes.

She was standing in a dim stairwell. Dr. Lesh, Ryan, and Marty surrounded her, supported her, were staring at her with expressions of concern, wonder, disbelief.

She looked strangely at the three of them—intensely, as if from a great distance—and then crumpled into Dr. Lesh's arms.

When Tangina awoke, she found Dr. Lesh sitting beside her.

"How are you feeling?" Lesh asked.

"Weak," Tangina said. For a few minutes, she cried.

“I think we’d better back off on these experiments,” Martha said quietly. She put her hand on Tangina’s brow, brushed back the moist hair.

“No,” Tangina answered. “No. We must help…”

“Who? Help who?”

Tangina squinted. “Ca . . . Carin? Carrie? Cara . . .” She shook her head. “She’s not far from here, but I don’t know where. I saw her in a different plane.”

“What kind of . . . plane?”

“A different dimension. I don’t know how she got there—but a great evil lurks near her. The poor child.”

“What . . . what exactly did you see?” Lesh was as fascinated as she was concerned.

“I still don’t completely remember—but some of it has a face now.” Tangina cried and laughed together. “Thank God, I begin to see some of these demons.”

“And what do they look like?”

“Oh for heaven’s sake, stop sounding so much like a psychotherapist! These demons are real—they exist! Would to God I’d never heard of such places—but if they’re going to haunt me, at least let me see them and name them, so I can dispatch them and be done.” She looked into Lesh’s face. “You’ve done that for me, this time—brought them into focus. Thank you.”

Lesh smiled like a grandmother soothing a skittish child. “You’re welcome. Now perhaps you will be so kind as to bring them into focus for *me*.”

Tangina closed her eyes to concentrate. “One is a shadow—a darkling creature I cannot comprehend. He is himself a conduit to another plane. Others abound there—a flame-being, a tree-being . . . they all have names I don’t recall. Thousands of lost souls . . . and the child. And a blissful, waiting light. And something else—something nocturnal—I can’t recapture it now.” She shuddered. “The child needs our help desperately.”

“What kind of help does she need?”

“She’s lost.”

“If you don’t know where, how will we find her?”

Ryan spoke from the doorway. “Maybe we could follow the PGO activity.”

The two women looked at him blankly a moment. Then a spark lit Tangina’s eyes. “What’s that?”

"Yes, what are you talking about, Ryan?" Dr. Lesh felt faintly annoyed. She sensed sarcasm in her student's manner, at a time when she was rather upset with all of them, herself included: she feared they'd gone too far with this poor woman.

"Just being empirical, Doctor," Ryan replied. "All those PGO discharges showing up on the EEG when they shouldn't have been there—but then they changed when she turned, they went away. And then when she turned again, they *really* went to town."

"So?"

"So we could hook her up to a telemetry unit—just a couple scalp electrodes and a small transmitter—and she could start walking, or riding, toward whatever it is she thinks she's picking up . . . and we could direct her from here, with a two-way radio. You know, see what her EEG looks like back here, and if the PGO activity starts increasing, then we can assume she's going generally in the right direction, and when PGO activity slacks off, we can tell her to turn some other way, until we start picking it up again." Ryan smiled helpfully.

"Preposterous," said Martha.

"I don't know, I think it's kind of innovative."

"Might it work?" asked Tangina, sitting up. "What is PGO activity?"

"It's a kind of brain wave we saw a lot of on your EEG around the time that . . . voice . . . came out. But first of all, you're in no condition to continue with this study, and second of all, we've never even seen an EEG transmitted telemetrically—we do all our recording directly, through wires, here in the lab. We've never tried to transmit and receive them over the air waves."

"Marty could rig something up easy," Ryan interjected. "The paramedics transmit electrocardiograms over the air all the time. We could just borrow an extra portable transmitting unit from one of the cardiology offices at the hospital, and hook the electrodes up to her scalp instead of her chest, no sweat."

Dr. Lesh saw the possibilities in what Ryan was saying, but her scientific interest in Tangina, the experiment, wrestled with her compassion for Tangina, the patient. "No," she finally said, "I can't allow . . ."

"Please," said Tangina softly. "Please . . . if there's a chance of this working . . . I . . . these dreams sap me. They toss me like a leaf in a typhoon, and I want them out of my life—but once they've started, like this, they won't let go, until they're resolved, one way or the other. A dream like this . . . it could go on for weeks. Please . . ." She began to weep again. "Please . . . if you can bring this one to an end sooner with your gadgets . . . please. Help me out the other side of this

one."

Lesh shook her head uncertainly. "I'm really not even certain if Ryan's idea has any merit or not . . ."

"Of course it has merit!" Ryan protested.

"Or, even if it does, I'm not sure we could fix up a telemetry unit as he suggests . . ."

"Marty's an electronics genius; he could do anything. In fact, I'll bet he could modify our receiving unit with a filter to block out all of her EEG transmissions *except* her PGO spikes—that way, it'll be real clear, the needle either deflects or it doesn't: when it does, Tangina's on the right track; when it doesn't, she's gotta turn until it does."

Tangina's eyes supplicated Dr. Lesh.

"All right. We'll try it once."

They set out the next night in Marty's VW bus. Ryan drove, Martha sat beside him in the front seat, and Tangina stretched out in the back like a child on a long trip.

Marty had spent all day modifying equipment along the lines of Ryan's plan. Now he sat in the rear section of the bus, behind Tangina, surrounded by electronics gear. There was an oscilloscope, with a wave-damper and frequency-filter on it, running off the bus's generator. Three electrode leads were plugged directly into the, oscilloscope, and dangled loosely along the floor to connect to leads glued to Tangina's head—one behind the right ear, one below the left eye, one at the left temple. Beside her was a small, portable telemetry unit—a transmitting box, easily carried, into which Tangina's scalp electrodes could be plugged so that if need be, she could walk outside the car for several miles, and the oscilloscope would still pick up her signals.

Marty also had with him a tapedeck and microphone, an infrared camera, a Nikon, three heavy-duty flashlights, two walkie-talkies, and a large thermos of coffee.

And so they were off

Tangina had stayed awake the rest of the preceding night and all the preceding day, preparatory to this quest; consequently, she started out exhausted—so putting her to sleep was no problem for Martha.

"I'm going to count from one to ten . . ." She began the hypnosis again, but Tangina was out cold by five. Thirty minutes later, they started seeing PGO spikes on the oscilloscope.

"Let's move out," said Marty. They headed east.

They drove for twenty minutes, due east, without any substantial change in the PGO activity. Infrequent BLIPS made bright, vertical green strokes across the screen, sometimes coming in twos and threes, sometimes as isolated events. Their incidence decreased somewhat at that point; Ryan turned north, and, after fifteen minutes, the little BEEPS vanished altogether. He turned south once more.

They chattered on at first—about grant applications, Marty's latest coed conquest, academic gossip, movies, courses—but after a while, the talk trickled, and then, at length, ceased. Only the hum of tires on road made any sound, syncopated by the occasional BLEEP from the oscilloscope.

It was a painstaking, trial-and-error process. At times they lost the signal completely, and drove in circles until they picked something up again. That went on for hours. They began to tire.

Just after six A.M., though, Tangina mumbled a few syllables and turned over.

"I think I'm getting something over here," Marty said almost simultaneously.

"Where the hell are we?" asked Ryan.

Lesh took out her map and turned on the overhead light. "I think we're heading east southeast, about, oh, thirty miles from home."

They looked out the window. Sparse country, here: rolling scrub, occasional farms or small towns.

"This is it!" Marty said breathily. "All kinds of activity back here. Wherever you're going, keep going."

"Mommy . . ." The willowy voice floated from Tangina's throat once more. It cut through the cab like a knife, silencing everyone else. So tormented, so thin: "Mommy . . . help me . . . something's coming . . ."

In the distance, a scattering of lights rose out of the low-lying hills.

"That must be the place," Ryan said softly. His throat was dry.

Ten minutes later he passed a large sign:

CUESTA VERDE ESTATES
PLANNED
PROPER
and
PROUD

A few minutes after that, he was driving in the midst of an expansive, extended housing development, and Tangina was writhing in misery.

“Ooohhhh . . . ohhhh noooo . . .”

Her pitiable wails were becoming unbearable to the others in the car. Ryan gripped the steering wheel with sweaty palms. Martha fidgeted almost to distraction in her seat. Marty tried to concentrate on adjusting sound levels in the tape deck, but he couldn’t concentrate. Tangina rolled around convulsively, then suddenly sat up and scrabbled at the door handle.

“Don’t let her out yet!” ordered Dr. Lesh. “Marty, switch over to telemetry. Ryan, stop the car!”

Ryan pulled over to the curb as Marty pulled the wires out of the oscilloscope and plugged them into the portable transmitter. Dr. Lesh got out of the bus with Ryan, and together they helped Tangina down to the ground. The clairvoyant’s eyes were stark and staring; she was distraught.

Martha carried the transmitter, whose wires now connected to Tangina’s electrodes. Ryan carried a walkie-talkie. Each took one of Tangina’s elbows, and slowly walked her into the night, as Marty remained behind, monitoring the oscilloscope.

They were on what looked like a typical suburban street. Corner and porch lights illuminated the sidewalks in the chill of the false dawn; an occasional lamp flickered inside a living room window. The air was still and quiet—except for the random, falsetto cries of this visionary dwarf, Tangina, wandering in a fugue, supported by two frightened academicians who feared they were out of their depth.

Ryan’s walkie-talkie squawked. “Getting warmer. Lots of PGO now. The whole screen is . . .”

Before the words were out of the box, Tangina loosed a shriek and set off at a dead run down the street. Ryan was taken by such surprise he just stood there with his chin down, and Martha actually fell to the ground. By the time they’d collected themselves, Tangina was scurrying up the lawn of a house half a block away. The others took off in pursuit.

All three reached the front door at just about the same moment—but Tangina was already banging, scratching, wailing; her nose was running, her knees scraped. She collapsed in a faint just as the door opened.

It would have been difficult to judge who was in a state of greater disrepair: the people just inside the front door, or the people outside. Steve stood there with his hand on the knob, in a bulky white cardigan over a wrinkled T-shirt. His eyes were dark hollows, his lips were parched, his hair stuck out in cowlicks, his stubble was two days old. Behind him, Diane crouched at the foot of the stairs, like the

shadow of a nightmare.

In front of Steve—on the porch—a small, strange person lay unconscious, wires coming out of her head and leading to a box being held by an older woman with mussed-up clothes and bloody knees, standing beside a wild-eyed man holding a two-way radio.

"I suspect," said Martha Lesh to Steve Freeling, "we are both in need of help. Would you please invite us in?"

Five of them sat around the low living room table in the gray morning: Steve, Diane, Martha, Ryan, Marty. Tangina lay sleeping comfortably on the couch. The others sipped coffee. All the curtains in the house were drawn.

"So that is the substance of our story," concluded Dr. Lesh. "I don't know who you are, or exactly what Tangina saw that drew us here . . . but I know the nature of her work before we began studying her. Several police departments are impressed with her capabilities . . . so I assume you have lost someone close to you. I'd like to help you in any way we can. Otherwise . . . if our presence here is as mystifying to you as it frankly is to me, we will all of us take our leave now, with many thanks for the coffee and forbearance."

Diane half sobbed, half laughed at the prospect of hope, then immediately collected herself—she would need all her faculties, she knew, for whatever was involved. "No . . . please . . . the hand of God has brought you here—I know it. God, or Providence. Please, stay. Help us."

"Fine," Lesh went on. "In that case, I'm going to have Ryan and Marty take Tangina back to the university—to the hospital. We've put her through quite too much, I'm afraid—she's exhausted. I have an associate on the staff there—Dr. Farrow. I'll call him presently; he'll see she's taken care of. In the meantime, perhaps we can continue our talk here: I'm at your disposal."

"You're being very kind." Steve spoke in a hoarse whisper.

"Not at all. I feel quite like an intruder in your home." Dr. Lesh turned toward her two assistants. "Marty, after you drop Tangina off at the hospital, why don't you go on back to the lab and wait for my call? Ryan, when you finish helping Marty, come right back here for me—we can determine what's to be done at that point."

The two young men rose, bid deferential good-byes to the Freelings, and helped Tangina to her feet. The psychic's eyes fluttered briefly; she was even able to walk, more or less, between the two assistants, but she didn't really wake up.

When they'd gone, Diane got up, wiped her eyes, smiled bravely. "I've got to go get Robbie ready for school. Excuse me." She walked briskly upstairs.

Steve sat alone on the couch, facing Dr. Lesh. He looked very alone. It was a situation Lesh had been in a thousand times before, though, as a therapist. Her training and natural compassion rose to the occasion, and gradually she put him at ease.

"May I call you Steve?"

"Yes. Yes, of course." He licked his lips.

"Steve, I've been talking a long time now. I feel as hoarse as Marlene Dietrich. So. It's your turn to talk."

He looked down at his empty hands. "I . . . don't know where to start."

"Start anywhere. Troubles have no beginning—just a big endless middle."

He laughed, shaking his head. "Oh, there was a beginning to these troubles, all right." He paused, gathering himself together to go on. "It began with the . . . disturbances."

He tensed himself against the reaction of disbelief he anticipated. "Things moving . . . by themselves. That's how it started. Then there are the flashing lights—in the middle of nowhere. Vague music that you can't quite hear. Funny smells. Sometimes a big wind will just blow through the house. And, of course, the furniture is still moving by itself whenever it wants . . ."

"Of course." Dr. Lesh tried to redirect him. "Are . . . all the members of your family involved in these . . . events?"

"Yes, yes. Yes. Diane—my wife—she was the first one to notice. Then my oldest daughter, Dana—she's fifteen. Robert, my son, he's seven . . . no, eight . . ." Steve rattled these facts off happily, rapidly. These things were his reality test; these were the things he knew. He paused. "And Carol Anne, she's my youngest. She's five." He looked at Dr. Lesh in pain, pleading silently with her to ask the right questions.

"Disturbances such as the ones you're describing usually appear on the news, on TV—I haven't seen any publicity, though."

In the background, the television was tuned to static. "No, we keep our set turned to Channel 23 usually . . ." Steve trailed off, then continued quickly, lest Dr. Lesh think him hopelessly crazy. "No—I mean . . . no. We haven't had any publicity. Absolutely no. Uh uh."

Martha nodded. "Can you be reasonably sure of not letting any get started?"

"It's the last thing in the world we want. No three-ring circuses. My

job, my family . . .”

“Would your family welcome a serious investigation of the disturbances by someone who could make first-hand observations?”

Steve almost broke down. He wrung his hands, tried to control the tremor in his chin. “Dr. Lesh. We don’t care about the disturbances . . . the pounding . . . the furniture . . . the flashes, the music.” He looked distractedly around the room, almost as if he were looking into the walls. “We just want to find our little girl.”

CHAPTER 4

For the next three hours, Lesh interviewed Steve and Diane, getting all the specifics of the case—what moved when, who was in the room when it happened, when the television was on, what channel it was tuned to, how, Carol Anne disappeared, and so on. They were so glad to talk about it with someone—anyone—they needed no coaxing to tell their story.

Up to now, they hadn't known whom to tell, or what to do. Call the police and file a missing persons report? They could just imagine the reaction that would have gotten them. Hire a medium to talk to the spirits? They had no idea how to contact such a person. They couldn't tell friends, for fear of being laughed at. They hardly believed it themselves. Certainly they couldn't allow the neighbors to find out—they'd be roasted out of the neighborhood, particularly by Teague, who had a distinct sense of propriety and community—and who didn't react well to abnormal behavior in his neighbors *or* his salesmen. He'd already called once to find out why Steve hadn't been showing up for work.

But just as certainly, they couldn't leave the house—not while Carol Anne was still there. She might reappear at any time; she might need them to help her; she was . . . somewhere here.

Dr. Lesh's appearance was a godsend. A sympathetic, credentialed scientist. A doctor. She could help them. She knew about paranormal events; she wouldn't discard their apprehensions, or scoff in ridicule. She would help them.

Ryan returned from the hospital just as Robbie was getting home for lunch.

"How was school?" Diane asked.

"Oh, I didn't have classes today," Ryan joked, coming through the front door on Robbie's heels.

"No lunch if you cut classes," Diane riposted. Her spirits were elevated enormously already—she just knew these kind people would find her baby.

"But the dog ate my homework," Ryan tried hopefully.

"Well . . . okay," Diane relented. "You can have lunch, too." She headed toward the kitchen. "You wash up, mister," she yelled at Robbie.

Steve entered the hallway with Dr. Lesh. “I was just going to take them up . . . to the bedroom,” he said to his wife.

Diane went on into the kitchen, talking over her shoulder. “You guys go on. I’m gonna try to keep sane by making food for everyone—we all have our little tricks.”

Steve nodded, and began to mount the steps, followed by Dr. Lesh and Ryan, with Robbie several paces behind. Ryan wore a 35-mm camera on his neck.

“I should warn you,” Steve said as they climbed, “we’ve had to lock off the room from the rest of the house. Robbie sleeps with us now. Dana, our oldest, spends a lot of time with . . . with friends.”

“How many disturbances have you recorded in this room?” Martha asked.

“We just don’t go in there any more.”

“We can set up in there,” Ryan assured him. “We’ll record any psychotronic energy or event that occurs—we’ve got all kinds of sensitive electronic devices; they can pick up the subtlest changes—things impossible to appreciate with the human eye.”

Dr. Lesh nodded agreement. “Ryan filmed an extraordinary episode during a case in Redlands.”

“It was!” said Ryan, his excitement rising at the prospect of more positive results to publish. “A child’s toy—a small matchbox vehicles—rolled seven feet across a linoleum surface. The duration of the event was seven hours.”

“Seven hours for what?” Steve asked, a bit confused.

“For the vehicle to complete the distance. The movement would never have registered on the naked eye, but I got the event on the time-lapse camera.”

Steve nodded as they reached the landing. The hallway was dark. He crossed the carpeted corridor slowly, feeling his way along the wall until he reached the closed door to the children’s room. Lesh and Ryan followed closely behind, though Robbie had second thoughts. When he got to the top of the stairs, he turned right around and ran down again—to light, and mother.

Steve extracted a key from his pocket, bent over, and fumbled at the lock on the door. Casually, Dr. Lesh and Ryan peered around the hallway, noting room positions, structural points. Quietly, Steve turned the lock and swung open the bedroom door. Casually, Ryan and Dr. Lesh looked into the room.

Shattered furniture and toys were everywhere. And everywhere, in motion.

The crippled bed hopped about in circles, as if something were vibrating the floor wildly. Records flew around in great arcs; a lamp careened by, nearly striking Ryan on the head. Toy animals sailed upside down, their stuffing half torn out; picture books flapped through the upper levels. A small plastic horse cruised by, ridden and slapped by a Barbie doll. The window was boarded up with a large piece of plywood, but inside the bedroom, a dark wind blew.

Lesh and Ryan stood motionless in the doorway, paralyzed with incredulity. “This has got to be a hoax,” Ryan whispered. “Right?”

The lamp sailed by again; as it passed, its bulb turned on, then exploded. Several books flew up to the door and hovered there, flapping madly as rabid bats. The books soared away, but were instantly replaced by a flying drawing-compass which rocketed straight at Lesh, its needle point spinning murderously toward her eye. She jumped back a step.

The compass hung there a moment, spinning, when suddenly a record floated by, directly in front of it. The compass point locked down onto the record and rotated over it, producing an eerie, unnatural melody—the sound of spirits wailing.

All at once, the door slammed shut, leaving Lesh and Ryan quaking in the hall.

Behind them, Steve nodded, and spoke quietly. “Like I said, we don’t go in there much any more.”

After a subdued lunch, Robbie went back to school; the others sat around the kitchen table over coffee and devil’s food cake.

Martha’s hands still shook imperceptibly as she lifted her cup to her mouth. Diane, on the other hand, had become totally calm, her frayed ends gathered together: for the first time in two days, she knew she wasn’t crazy; moreover, an expert was here.

“None of us have been much fun to be around,” she said matter-of-factly. “I guess you can tell I haven’t slept very much. Steve’s been staying home from work; he’s really been wonderful. Really.” Nobody said anything—Ryan and Lesh were still both rather shaken—so Diane continued, with genuine interest: “How long have you been investigating haunted houses?”

Dr. Lesh looked slightly embarrassed. “Well, Mrs. Freeling . . .”

“Diane.”

“The determination as to whether your home is ‘haunted’ is not a very easy one.”

At that moment the coffee pot moved, of its own accord, two feet,

to the very edge of the table, then stopped. With great force of will, Dr. Lesh overlooked this display, and, as casually as possible, went on speaking.

“What I meant to say was, there could be numerous explanations for the things we see happening here.”

“Such as?”

“Might be a poltergeist,” added Ryan. “Instead of your classic haunting, that is.”

“There’s a difference?”

Ryan felt completely dislocated. Here he was, a scientist, a man who believed in natural cause and effect, seriously entertaining notions of ghosts and goblins. Every few minutes he quietly reassured himself under his breath: “I saw what I saw. A scientist must objectively report what he sees. I saw what I saw.”

Two bright flashes of light exploded soundlessly a few feet away. Out of nowhere.

“Anybody see that?” Ryan looked quickly from face to face around the table. Could it be a group hallucination?

“There’ll be two more in a few seconds,” smiled Diane. “They always travel in pairs.”

Ryan sat speechless, his camera unattended around his neck. Martha nudged him and pointed to it. “Ryan,” she said.

Ryan looked alert and began to fumble with the setting, just as two more flashes popped at the other end of the room.

“Gotta be quicker than that around here,” Diane said affably.

“It’s electrical,” Ryan commented, sniffing the air. “You can smell the charge.”

“Are there any large power generators in the area?” Dr. Lesh asked.

“Not that we know of.”

“I just can’t imagine any power source that I’m familiar with producing any of the phenomena we witnessed upstairs,” Ryan insisted bleakly.

“What are you saying?” Diane let a hint of doubt filter into her voice.

“Martha, maybe we should bring Tangina back here,” Ryan went on.

Lesh shook her head. “Later, maybe—if she gets her strength back—depending on what we find. For all we know at the moment, though, this could all be a function of some as yet uncharacterized electromagnetic field, which . . .”

“Of course, of course . . . all I’m saying is she may be more qualified, *de facto*, to at least delineate . . .”

“She’s my patient, first and foremost, Ryan. *Primum non nocere*. First, do no harm. That’s the basic law of medicine. If and when she gets over the trauma of this experience, I may bring her back here. Until then, it looks to me like we’re going to have more data to monitor here than we can even make a dent in analyzing by traditional means . . .”

“What are you saying?” Diane interjected.

“I’m going to call up our lab tech, Marty, right now, and have him bring over all our equipment. Cameras, field detectors, and so on . . . if it’s all right with you. We will investigate these matters fully and rigorously, and . . .”

Diane touched Martha on the sleeve. “And you were saying about poltergeists . . .”

Lesh paused, and smiled empathetically: she’d gotten a little carried away in front of these poor, needy people. “I was saying at one point, I think—or perhaps Ryan was saying—that poltergeists are generally associated with an individual. So the literature claims, at least. Whereas hauntings—in the general vernacular—seem to be connected with an area . . . a house, usually.”

“Also,” Ryan added, “poltergeist disturbances are of fairly short duration. Perhaps a couple of months. Hauntings typically are said to go on for years.”

Diane, who’d been following intently what the two said, suddenly grabbed Steve’s hand and pulled it to her; a chill settled on the table, and in her voice. “Are you telling me all this could just end at any time?”

Martha tried to sound clinically detached. “Unless it’s a haunting. But as a rule—and again I must stress, this is only what I read in the published reports—but as a rule, there seems to be no living person around whom haunting incidents revolve.”

“Then we don’t have much time, Dr. Lesh,” whispered Diane. “Because my daughter is alive somewhere in this house.”

Dana sat at the lunch table at school, sipping on a carton of milk. Beside her sat Heather and Trudie. They all looked rather serious.

“But everyone’s parents are psycho, Dana. Your brain just starts to rot when you get old. Before you know it, you have a stroke.”

“But this is really the limit. My little sister is stuck or hiding somewhere in the house; it sounds like she’s scared out of her gourd—

and my parents . . . aren't . . . doing . . . a thing."

"Maybe they're trying to teach her a lesson, or some bullshit like that. My parents are always pulling that one. Like when they made me smoke so many cigarettes in a row I puked."

"No, this is even weirder—they *want* her to come back. But I think they think she got zapped away by the tornado, and now this is her *ghost* they're talking to."

"Wow."

"Far out."

"Your parents think *that*?"

"Dana, your parents need est."

"You know, my parents absolutely don't believe my older sister Katie *exists*—ever since she joined the Hare Krishnas. It's like . . . they really think she's dead. Really. So maybe like this is the same type of thing."

"Maybe." Dana shook her head sadly. "All I know is, the whole *house* gives me the creeps now, especially after dark."

"Who could blame you?"

"It's like . . . they've almost got *me* believing I hear these funny knocks and rattles now . . . I mean, I half believe *they're* hiding Carol Anne somewhere, for some weird reason. I don't know *what's* going on anymore."

"Hey! Maybe your parents are trying to drive you crazy, like in *Gaslight*. Remember, when Ingrid Bergman thinks the lights are getting dim, and Joseph Cotton . . ."

"Why would anyone want to drive *me* crazy, idiot?"

Trudie scratched her chin and sat back. "For the insurance?"

Dusk. Marty had spent most of the afternoon setting up equipment in the Freeling living room, and now was nearly finished. Two television cameras—one with a wide-angle lens—stood covering different areas of the room. Each was connected to a videotape recorder, and each of these plugged into its own monitor. In addition, there were automatic 35-mm cameras on tripods, connected to trip-wires; infrared and ultraviolet cameras; tapedecks and microphones that registered ultra-low to ultra-high frequencies; a thermograph, an ionization monitor, a magnometer, a barometer, a seismograph, and a small fluoroscope. The place looked like a den of mad scientists.

Diane and Steve sat on the couch holding hands, while all this activity buzzed around them. Martha, Ryan, and Marty made final

adjustments, checked adapter connections, and generally maintained a high level of excitement.

Dana walked in from upstairs, an overnight bag strapped around her shoulders.

Diane smiled wanly, and spoke without rising. “Dana, I’d like you to meet Doctor . . .”

“It’s getting dark, Mom. Gotta go. I’ll call you from Trudie’s.” Her speech was terse, clipped. It was hard for Lesh to hear, whether the girl was annoyed, ashamed, or simply afraid.

“She won’t stay in the house after dusk,” Steve explained weakly, almost apologetic. “Our absentee princess.”

“She’s got brains,” Robbie muttered disgustedly. He sat on the rug, playing with a truck.

Without another word, Dana ran out the front door. Diane stood and turned on the large console television. The local news was just finishing up a story about after-effects of the storm damage suffered two nights before, when Diane turned the dial to UHF—Channel 81.

“We receive better on this channel, but don’t ask me why.”

Perplexed, Dr. Lesh stared at the screen, as did the others. The characteristic blue-white light filled the room, becoming pronounced as Steve walked from lamp to lamp, turning each one off. Finally there was only the light of the television, cold and intense, and the hiss of the static snow.

Ryan and Marty put on headphones, and aimed one of the television cameras and all three microphones at the set as Diane turned up the volume of the hissing. Lesh put on her glasses. Steve lit a cigarette, took a long, tense drag. Diane touched him a moment—for reassurance—and spoke to the group.

“I’ll call her.”

It was said so simply, and without moment, that Dr. Lesh inadvertently held her own breath. Diane walked to the center of the living room, folded her hands in front of her, collected her thoughts, closed her eyes, took a deep breath . . . and spoke lovingly to the ceiling.

“It’s Mommy, sweetheart. We want to talk to you. Baby, please answer. Please talk to me, Carol Anne.”

Dr. Lesh darted a glance at her assistants, checking their reactions to this. Marty seemed unfazed, interested primarily in his meters and levels. Ryan was clearly fascinated, yet obviously uncertain how to respond to . . . all this. Martha was uncertain herself. What was going to happen?

E. Buzz suddenly pranced into the room, looking up in the air as if he were following on the heels of someone with a treat. His tail was wagging; he was oblivious to everyone else in the room.

“Look at the dog,” Lesh whispered breathlessly to Ryan.

Marty furrowed his forehead, and pressed the headphones more tightly around his ears. The dog walked to the far end of the room, then sat up on his hind legs and begged . . . to blank air.

“Are you with us now, sweetheart?” Diane asked the room. “Can you say hello to Daddy? Say hello to Daddy, baby.”

Ryan shook his head slowly—even started to smile, as skepticism began to outweigh his other emotions. So this was a hoax, after all. Or if not a hoax, an unfortunate mistake. A cruel happenstance, with this pitiful family . . .

He heard something. The smile vanished from his lips as he pushed the headset hard to his ears. His pulse quickened.

Marty heard it, too. He fiddled with his dials—gains, filters, frequencies. “Good Lord . . .” he whispered.

Everyone faced the television—straining, leaning forward into the fluorescent glow, squinting, holding their breath. Not a sound, not a flicker. And then, soft as a distant memory, sweet and fragile, a voice: “Hello, Daddy.”

“Hello, sweetheart,” whispered Steve. His throat was constricted with feeling, his eyes were moist. Dr. Lesh, sitting beside him, was so startled by what she’d heard she actually jumped up off the couch. Slowly, with great trepidation, she approached the set, staring into the swirling snow. It was the voice she’d heard the previous night on Tangina’s lips. It made her shiver.

Everyone stood.

Diane spoke again. “Darling, it’s Mommy.”

“Hello, Mommy.” The voice seemed to be coming out of the television.

Imperceptibly, Marty shook his head. Something was not right about all this. A voice in the television? It was too easy. Anyone could have tampered with the set. He looked at Ryan for support in this suspicion, but Ryan was completely engrossed, fiddling with the recorders, checking the infrared monitors and ion flux measurements.

Quickly, Marty removed his headphones, opened his repair kit on the floor, and withdrew a Phillips screwdriver and a flashlight. Then he walked to the back of the television console, unscrewed the masonite dust cover, and shined his light into the chassis. Methodically, he examined the circuitry.

Diane spoke once more. “Can you see me? Can you see Mommy?”

“Where are you, Mommy? Where are you? I can’t see you!”

“We’re home, baby. Come home to Mommy. Can you find the way?”

“I’m afraid, Mommy. I’m afraid of the light.”

Dr. Lesh moved rapidly to Diane’s side. “Tell her to stay away from the light.” She spoke evenly, but urgently.

“But maybe it’s a way out!” Diane protested.

“It is. It is a way out . . . it’s *the* way out. But not for her. Tell her quickly.”

“Carol Anne. Where is this light?”

“Tell her to stay away from it! Tell her now!” Lesh gripped Diane’s arm.

“Tell her, Diane!” Steve urged, hanging on the fear in Lesh’s voice.

Diane nodded uncertainly. “Sweetheart, the light is dangerous. Don’t go near it. Don’t look at the light.”

Marty sidled up behind Dr. Lesh. “I don’t think I believe this,” he whispered. “The set looks okay, but the voice could be a CB broadcasting from somewhere in the house. I’m taking a look.”

Lesh nodded absently, spoke under her breath. “It’s not a hoax.” This was a conviction now. She didn’t know why; she was simply certain.

“We’ll see,” said Marty. He moved out of the white glare and tiptoed up the steps to the second floor.

E. Buzz barked again, then jumped into the air and caught something in his mouth. It drew everyone’s attention to him, just in time to see several mid-air electrical discharges flash brightly above his head. Almost blindingly bright, for a few moments they illuminated the room, then disappeared, leaving a smell of ozone.

“What was that?”

From the area of sparking, a number of small objects materialized and fell immediately to the carpet. Lesh and the others gathered around to examine the articles: jewelry, cameos, brooches, coins, pocket watches, digital watches, money clips, key chains, a few small bones. The dog came over and sniffed at the pile suspiciously.

Dr. Lesh looked back at Ryan, still bent over his controls. “Anything?”

“Nothing registered,” he muttered, checking the readouts.

“Mommy . . .” The voice in the television grew louder, edged with fear. “Mommy . . . there’s somebody here.”

Steve held his head in his hands, nearly beside himself with worry. “Oh Jesus, this isn’t happening.”

“Mommy . . . is that you?”

“Who’s there, baby? Who is with you?”

“Somebody’s coming, Mommy.” The voice was tight as a spring, straining to its upper registers.

“Stay away, baby!” Diane whimpered. “Go back . . .”

A piercing wail screamed out of the television—a child’s scream, mad with terror. “Nooo! No, no, no, no . . .”

“Run, Carol Anne! Run away!” Diane screamed back at the set. “Run!”

Marty crept silently along the upstairs corridor until he came to Dana’s room. The door was ajar. He nudged it open and entered, keeping his back to the wall. With his shoulder, he turned on the light.

Nothing extraordinary here. An adolescent girl’s room. Stereo, piles of records, magazines, books, crumpled clothes, blow dryer, Rocky Horror Picture Show poster, lace curtains, and suede boots. He looked quickly under the bed—no transmitting devices there. He walked over to the closet.

He opened the closet door. Dark all the way to the back; the light was out. Racks of clothes hung before him, looking vaguely phantasmagorical in the shadows. The smell of rose oil filled the space like the olfactory memory of an earlier life. Marty inhaled deeply, began rummaging through the blouses and flowing robes on the hangers, the piled junk on the floor.

In the back corner, he saw something. A dim shape, nearly a box, almost hidden behind a stack of papers and old shoes. Possibly a transmitter. Maybe even just a tapedeck, with hidden speakers downstairs. He pushed his way along the row of garments, dangling sleeves brushing his cheeks. Finally he came to the shape.

He knocked aside the camouflage. It was a box. Triumphantly, he pulled it open: a packet of rolling papers, half a lid of California Homegrown, a cleaning screen, a few matchbooks. Marty laughed. He quickly decided not to roll himself a number—Lesh would get pissed off. and besides, there were too many bad vibes in this house; he’d probably just get paranoid.

He checked out the bathroom at the end of the hall, next. The shower curtain was closed—why did they always leave the shower curtain closed at times like this? He ripped it open dramatically, half expecting his lurkiest horror. Unremarkable. Down the dark hall

again, to the master bedroom.

An odd smell was here. Like . . . mildew, or mold. He wondered if a small animal hadn't died, and gotten stuck behind the dresser or something. He looked. Nothing there. Nor under the bed, nor in the closets or drawers. He went into the master bathroom. All mirrored and tiled and bright—Marty couldn't imagine anything sinister or covert here. He curiously checked the tub, the cabinets; went to open the cupboard beneath the sink. It wouldn't open.

That was strange. There were no locks on it. Yet hard as he pulled on the handles, the doors wouldn't give. He hunkered down, braced himself to get some good leverage, was about to pull . . . when he heard the noise. The noise came from inside the cabinet he was trying to open.

An unearthly growling, a gnashing of feral teeth—quiet, actually, but covering such restrained power, such barely contained violence, it sounded as if it had to be coming from a creature ten times bigger than anything that could have crouched in that small space.

Marty stood up quickly, pale and alert. He backed out of the bathroom. He didn't know what the Freelings' game was, but he didn't want any part of what was under that sink.

He ran back out into the somber hall, finally coming to the closed door of the children's room. It had to be pranksters; there was no other reasonable explanation.

The lights were all off up here; he couldn't locate a switch. He knew this was the last door, though. Gently, he put his ear to it: distant echoes, like wind in a cave. Deliberately, he collected his courage; carefully, he tested the doorknob. Locked.

He was definitely getting a case of nerves. Downstairs he could hear all kinds of commotion going on indistinctly; at one point, even a muted explosion, like the sound of troubled thunder. He inhaled and exhaled deeply. Okay, it was now or never.

It was now. He pulled a file from his utility belt, and with deft fingers began to jimmy the lock. In a few seconds he found the thread, and the lock slid back. Quietly, he began to turn the knob.

Without a moment's warning, something putrid sank its teeth into Marty's side. He screamed in agony as he was thrown to the floor—and reflexively thrashed out, rolling over and over, down the darkened hallway toward the top of the stairs.

Ryan gaped at his readouts—suddenly everything was registering wildly. Beyond him, in the television, the screams continued

mercilessly.

Diane couldn't stand it anymore. She pressed her hands over her ears, tears streaming down her face, imploring Dr. Lesh with her eyes. Lesh had to look down. She felt totally impotent.

Robbie sat huddled in the corner, rocking autistically, too scared to cry. Steve paced frenetically back and forth, swinging his arms in helpless rage. The dog whimpered, curled under a chair.

"Carol Anne!" Diane screamed again. "Oh God!"

Steve began pounding the wall.

"You fucking bastard, she's just a baby!" Diane groaned in a failing voice.

"Mommy! Mommy!"

"Help her!" Diane screamed at Lesh now. "Can't you hear what's happening? For the love of God, help her!"

Before Lesh could say a word, the sound of small, soft footsteps ran across the ceiling and down the wall. Two lamps on the table against the wall overturned, smashing to pieces on the floor.

Right away, slow, colossal footfalls boomed over the same path in pursuit—across the ceiling, down the wall. The table broke in half, was crushed to pieces. The house shook with the rumble of these steps.

Suddenly a warm gust of wind raced over Diane, blowing her hair wildly around, whooshing through her clothes. Her eyes sprang open wide, her mouth dropped—she let out a long peal of sound; raw emotion, a primal combination of joy and horror. Then she whispered: "She just moved through me. My God, I felt her. I can smell her. It feels like she went through my soul!"

She ran over to. Steve and pulled him to her. "Smell my clothes. Here. It's her. It's her all over me."

He brought the tail of her shirt up to his nose and inhaled. Tears filled his eyes. "It is Carol Anne. My God, I can't believe it."

The giant, pursuing footsteps grew louder now, moving this way and that across the room, up the walls, knocking over chairs and breaking pictures: as if searching, fruitlessly. Everyone in the room faced the loathesome sounds—the heavy feet, the sickening grunts—when suddenly a terrifically foul smell filled the air. The smell of rotting, of death. A moment later, there was an implosion—almost the sound of thunder, almost the horror of suffocation. The impact was tremendous, blowing everyone backward, as a force like a tornado passed through each of them, and out the picture window. The window cracked in a dozen places.

All at once, the room was quiet.

“Carol Anne?” Diane wheezed.

Unremitting quiet.

“Steve? She doesn’t answer.”

“She’s safe, I think. For now.”

Diane sat on the floor, shaking as if she herself were the lost child. “How much longer will this continue?”

Her son crawled over and put his arms around her, to comfort her. “Don’t worry, Mom. We’ll find Carol Anne. She’s prob’ly at Gramma’s. Maybe we should look for her there. Don’t cry,” What had just happened was almost the scariest thing to Robbie—to see his mother failing to cope.

Dr. Lesh stood and walked to the pile of artifacts that had sprinkled to the floor. She picked up an antique brooch. “Have you ever heard of the term ‘teleportation’?” she asked the others.

No one was exactly listening to her, but she continued speaking, more or less rhetorically. “I’ve read of it, of course—there was that case report only last month, in the *Journal of Parapsychology*, of that carpenter’s tools which kept disappearing from his shed, to be seen settling to the ground outside his kitchen window much later. The literature is full of such anecdotes. But this is the first time I’ve ever *witnessed* the phenomenon.” She blinked her eyes several times, then closed them, hefting the trinket in amazement. “I am moved,” she whispered.

Robbie tilted his head like a curious puppy. “Is it sort of like when Mr. Spock beams up Captain Kirk on ‘Star Trek’?”

Lesh smiled with her eyes. “Very much like that, Robbie.” Her expression glazed over momentarily as certain connections were made, concepts formulated. She turned to Steve. “Where exactly do you suppose Carol Anne was playing before she vanished from sight?”

“Her bedroom closet. And she wasn’t playing.”

“Let’s go up there.” Her face glittered with anticipation.

Steve shrugged. “The closet door won’t let you in if it doesn’t want to.”

“We’ll just see about that.” Dr. Lesh raised her eyebrows and arched her head at what sounded to her suspiciously like a challenge. Then, with the others straggling behind, she headed for the staircase.

As they neared the corner to the hall, they heard an agonizing scream. A moment later, Marty was rolling down the stairs. They rushed up to find him slumped against the bottom step, breathing

deeply, holding his side. Dr. Lesh ran over to him.

"What happened?"

"I was just about to check out the locked bedroom when . . . I don't know . . . something took a bite out of me."

Marty's story frightened Robbie inordinately. His teeth began to chatter. "You got bit?"

"That, or the most physical delusion ever recorded."

Dr. Lesh became immediately clinical, a look of educated concern molding her features. "Roll up your shirt. Lets have a look."

Diane turned on the hall light as Marty untucked his shirt and pulled it up to his chest. Everyone crowded around to look.

Purple, angry bruises fanned out from a long row of tooth marks that wrapped entirely around Marty's flank, from back to belly—as if some strange, horrible creature with a twelve-inch-wide jaw had tried to take a big chomp out of his side.

Robbie reached out, gingerly touched the mark of the beast. "Wow."

Dr. Lesh examined the bite, then looked tentatively up the half-lit flight of stairs. She considered a moment, straightened up, and rubbed her hands together like a cruise director. "Let's everybody spend the night down here."

Steve had had enough. "Honey, I want you and Robbie to come with me. We'll sleep in town, and tomorrow . . ."

"I'm not leaving Carol Anne." Diane's response was firm and quick.

Robbie looked fearfully from father to mother to doctor to overbite. "I don't want to stay here anymore. This place bites." He remembered his clown in the backyard, too, and held his finger.

"You take Robbie into town," Diane said to Steve.

"No way. I'm not leaving you alone in this house."

It was a precarious combination of strain, love, and fear, tipping this interaction near the brink. Delicately, Dr. Lesh extricated herself from its midst and returned to the living room. She had a natural gift for defusing tensions, so with a grand flourish she bent over, grabbed the apron of the couch, and pulled: it folded out raucously into a large convertible bed. "Blankets, pillow, sheets," she called out. "Let's have a slumber party."

CHAPTER 5

There was a slightly forced jollity to the rest of the evening's preparations and activity. More bedding and pillows were brought down from the master bedroom; Mr. Pizza delivered two large ones, half onions and peppers, half sausage; everyone helped Robbie knock off his homework. It was like a little city under seige.

The machinery was repositioned, rechecked, recalibrated. Ryan suggested they tell ghost stories, but nobody laughed. E. Buzz started acting weird—tail between his legs, whining, walking in circles. He accidentally almost knocked over one of the camera tripods. To forestall any mishaps, Diane put him out back, tied to his doghouse.

Night settled down in earnest.

Diane and Robbie curled up together in the convertible bed. Steve slouched fitfully in his long reclining chair, exhausted, but unable to sleep. The television was still tuned to snow.

Dr. Lesh looked over Marty's shoulder as he zeroed the oscilloscope, tested the electro-hygrometer. She could feel her pulse beating in her temple. This was all too strange.

She walked, like a sentry on her appointed rounds, into the hallway, where Ryan sat in a big easy chair facing the staircase and upper story. He was engrossed in aiming one of the television cameras and two special-wavelength cameras directly up the stairs. Martha tapped him on the shoulder, and he nearly jumped out of his skin.

Ryan spoke forcefully, though in whispers, so as not to disturb the valiant efforts of those trying to sleep. "Jesus, my heart!"

"Shhh!" Dr. Lesh admonished. Then, smiling, conspiratorial: "More thrills than grading papers, wouldn't you say?"

Ryan wagged his finger at her in false bravado. "I can leave here anytime, you know This isn't the army, and you're not my mother."

"If push comes to shove, I bet I'll beat you out the door." Dr. Lesh winked. She regarded the monitors: "Any movement out of those things?"

"There's been some random ionization flux. I'd like to make sure it's not caused by humidity coming from structure leakage—but I'm not going up there to find out."

"Galileo would have gone up to find out. Newton would have gone

up."

"So go up."

She looked up the dark, inverted stairwell, then back at Ryan. Sternly she whispered, "This isn't the army, and you're not my mother . . ."

Ryan smiled. Marty walked up. "You know," said Ryan, "something's going on in this house way beyond all the creaking doors and cold spots we've investigated before."

"No shit," Marty replied. "These denture marks in my side aren't just chicken liver. Something tried to chow down on me up there."

"Did you photograph those, by the way?" Lesh asked Ryan.

"Photos, tooth impressions, bacteriological cultures—we got the works."

Lesh nodded. "This certainly seems to be more than the average paranormal episode taking place here."

"You know, you people are like masters of understatement. I just hope you both get to meet the dude with the big mouth."

Lesh screwed up her mouth. "That voice source on the television . . . I wonder where it could be coming from."

"I still don't think we can rule out the possibility of some kind of generator or transmitter being kept in the locked bedroom upstairs—I mean, *maybe* all that stuff we saw flying around was magnetized, and there's a tremendous, spinning magnetic field in there generated by . . ."

Lesh and Marty looked at Ryan with heads askew.

"No, huh? Okay, the voice source on the television, then . . . the absence of a signal on a channel that is not receiving a broadcast is free to receive a lot of noise from all sorts of things like short-wave, CB . . ."

"Solar disturbances," came in Marty, "car-ignition sparking . . ."

"Outer space," Ryan whispered, making his eyes wide.

Lesh harrumphed. "Now, you've been reading too much science fiction."

"What, are you kidding?" Ryan was incensed. "All this stuff happening to us personally, and you talk to me about science fiction? Signals from outer space being picked up by a receiving unit here is not so far out, you know. NASA has discs all over the planet just *waiting* for a signal. And were sending *out* signals to who knows where—so maybe who knows where would just rather broadcast on Channel 83 in Cuesta Verde than at Mount Palomar."

“And speaking of outer space,” Marty added, “what about black holes?”

“What about them?” Lesh puckered her eyebrows with a look of skepticism bordering on lampoon.

“What if these people had one in their own living room?”

“Hey, that’s a thought,” nodded Ryan. “A tiny black hole, sucking up everything that gets too close—everything that crosses its event horizon—and sucking it into a totally different space-time continuum.”

Ryan picked up one of the emerald brooches that had materialized earlier, held it to the light. “And then some stuff gets spit out the other side again, back into our boring old universe.”

Lesh shook her head, unconvinced.

Ryan looked at the spot near the ceiling where all the teleportations had taken place. “If that’s the way out . . . then somewhere else in this house, there’s a way in.” He looked up toward the locked bedroom.

Lesh’s shoulders dropped an inch. “Too bad we don’t have a tool for measuring the curvature of time and space with us here.”

Ryan nodded wistfully, and went back to adjusting his instruments.

Time passed. The house seemed to be sleeping, just the way houses do at night. Dr. Lesh paced the floor to keep herself from dozing. Like the others, she had slept little for quite some time, and though she was still wired on adrenalin, she knew that if she sat still for too long, she could easily nod out now from sheer exhaustion—and she couldn’t afford to sleep just yet. Overextended as she was, she needed to extend herself only a little further to see this thing through.

She felt how desperately the others needed sleep, though—Diane and Steve, especially. Perhaps she could give them at least a couple of hours peace. She walked over to the television console and turned it off, extinguishing the ghastly white light for the first time.

A small, reedy voice spoke from the convertible bed. “Please. Leave it on.” It was Diane.

Dr. Lesh smiled, turned the set back on, and walked over to the couch. Robbie was sleeping. Diane sat up on one elbow.

She watched Dr. Lesh approach in the dim dark—and suddenly had an image of her favorite storybook grandmother, coming to wrap her in a comforter, sing her a sweet lullaby, rock her to luxurious sleep. She smiled back almost tearfully as the doctor sat down on the edge of the bed.

Diane whispered, “When things get quiet like now, I can imagine how all this must look from your end. I’m really embarrassed.”

“Oh, nonsense.” Lesh made a batting motion with her hand. “I’ll tell you what is embarrassing. My being here with you nice people. Parapsychology isn’t something you master in. There are no certificates of graduation, no license to practice. I’m a professional psychiatrist who spends most of her time these days engaged in this ghostly avocation—which makes me, I suppose, the most irresponsible sixty-one-year-old woman I know.”

“You were so funny today—your hands were shaking a mile a minute.” Diane unexpectedly began to giggle, in relief and release. Martha’s emotions were identical; she, too, started laughing. Robbie woke up, rubbing his eyes—the two women shushed each other but continued to speak softly.

“It isn’t over,” cautioned Lesh. “I’m perfectly terrified. It’s all these things we don’t understand. I feel like the proto-human, stepping out of the forest primeval and seeing the moon for the first time. Throwing rocks at it.”

“You mean someday we’ll understand these things?”

“When it is recognized for what it is. As any science. We don’t understand everything now—in fact, I’ve come to believe, over the years, that we understand virtually nothing, though most of my colleagues would take issue with that.”

“And here I thought scientists understood it all.” Diane half smiled.

“Understanding and sponsorship seem always to be one hundred years behind ridicule and doubt. Out of this experience, in this house, should we capture a high-resolution photograph of a genuine manifestation, *Time* magazine will still put us on the joke page.”

Moonlight filtered through the closed curtain, casting cold lines along the floor. Steve shifted in his chair, trying to get comfortable. The house remained quiet, filled with shadow.

Robbie sat up in bed. “If I got killed, would I come back as a ghost and get stuck in the house like my sister?”

“Your sister isn’t dead, Robbie,” Diane instructed him simply.

“If I got killed, could I visit her and show her how to get back here if you tied a rope around me and held it tight? Then somebody could come get me, and we could move somewhere else?”

“Some people believe,” said Martha, “that when you die, your soul goes to heaven.”

“When Grampa was dead, I looked at him on the hospital bed, and I was watchin’ real close, but nothing went up out of him.”

“His soul was invisible, honey,” said Diane. She wiped a lock of hair off her son’s forehead. “You couldn’t see it going to the sky.”

“How come Grampa isn’t on television with Carol Anne?”

“I told you, Robbie—Carol Anne isn’t dead.”

Dr. Lesh lowered herself to one elbow, so she was eye level with Robbie. “Some people believe that when you die, there is a wonderful light. As bright as the sun, but it doesn’t hurt to look into it. All the answers to all the questions you want to know are inside that light. And when you walk to it . . . you become a part of it forever.”

“But what about the invisible people who keep throwing our chairs around?”

“Well, maybe some people, when they die, they don’t know they’re gone.”

“They think they’re still alive?”

“Maybe. Maybe they didn’t want to die. Maybe they weren’t ready. Maybe they’d hardly begun to live yet, or they lived a long, long time anyway, but wanted more life. They resist going into the light, no matter how hard the light wants them. They hang around, watch television, watch their friends grow up, feeling all unhappy or jealous—and those feelings are bad. They hurt. Then there are some people who just get lost on the way to the light—maybe they got sidetracked, or just curious about something else. They need someone to lead them there—to the light.”

“So some people get angry and throw things around, like in my bedroom?”

“That’s it. Just like in school. There are people who are nice to you. And people who are mean.

“I got beat up once by three kids. They took my lunch money. Maybe they got hit by a truck and are upstairs right now.”

Diane sighed with strong love and sadness for Robbie. She stroked the back of his head affectionately, then lay him down on the pillow. “Let’s get some shut-eye, waddaya say, partner?”

Robbie sighed and closed his eyes. “Good night, Mom. G’night, doctor lady. G’night, Dad. G’night, E. Buzz.”

Diane and Martha shared a warm look over the boy’s recumbent figure. Briefly he lifted his head once more, and looked at the silent white television screen. “G’night, Carol Anne.”

Two hours went by. Steve, Diane, Robbie, even Martha Lesh drifted off to sleep. The two younger researchers remained awake, if not alert, at their respective stations, periodically glancing over the banks of monitors that surrounded them. Lulled by the electric hum.

The rest of the house was preternaturally quiet. Occasionally, a breeze outside would rise up to rattle one of the windows, and the noises were so jarring, so unexpected, they made Ryan and Marty twitch wildly, then exchange nervous smiles and return to what they were doing.

Ryan read one of his course books—Dunne's classic, if convoluted, treatise on the nature of time and its relation to precognition. Marty perused a *Popular Mechanics*, a couple of *People* magazines, a *TV Guide*. About three o'clock, his stomach growled, startling him out of the haze he was beginning to fade into. He looked over his shoulder into the kitchen.

Hungry, sleepy. He stood up, shook himself awake, motioned to Ryan for Ryan to cover his instruments while Marty went for a stretch in the direction of the supplies. Ryan nodded, cursorily checked over all the readouts, and lowered his gaze once more into the difficult prose of J. W. Dunne. Marty walked into the kitchen. The kitchen was dark.

He couldn't locate the light switch, so he turned on his flashlight to find the refrigerator. He found that quickly enough. He opened the door to the big Amana, and the fridge light went on, bathing Marty in a cold white glow.

He ate a little salad directly from the bowl on the shelf, but the crunching sounded too loud. He didn't want to wake the house, so he looked for something else.

He pulled out a chicken leg, which he held between his teeth, and a piece of steak in plastic wrap, which he put down on the counter. He shut the refrigerator door, throwing the room once again into darkness. He flipped on his flashlight and began opening drawers, looking for a knife and fork.

Spare utensils, rubber bands and pencils, the sound of each drawer opening, its contents rattling, drawer closing with a soft knock, then Marty's feet shuffling to the next drawer. The beam of the flashlight swung randomly across the glossy room, throwing stark shadows in odd places. Marty stopped, and tilted his head. He'd heard a sound.

A strange, uncharacterizable sound: gushy, bubbling. A crawling sound. It was coming from the area where he'd just laid the steak. He turned quickly, in time to see a shape moving there. He raised his light to illuminate the counter.

The steak was alive. Alive with death. Grotesquely, it crawled along the counter and over itself, growing, bubbling with cancerous tumors, caseous blebs. Undulating, foul, it came.

Marty gagged, and, in so doing, realized he still held the chicken leg

in his mouth. Furiously, he spit it onto the floor. With a gasp he shined his light on it.

A thousand maggots writhed on the chicken, then crazily began wriggling off it, onto the floor all around Marty's feet, into all the dark and hidden corners of the kitchen. Marty retched, and stumbled into the utility room in back.

His head fumbled along the wall as he bent over the sink, vomiting stomach bile. Finally, his fingers came to the light switch; he flicked it on.

Still leaning over the sink, he slowly regularized his breathing, slowly quieted his gag reflex. He felt weak and faint. Slowly, he lifted his head up to look in the wall mirror, to check his pallor. The reflection of his face in the mirror was of a rotting corpse. Its hair streamed insanely, its mouth dangled open. Horrified, out of control, Marty raised his hands and plunged his fingers into the putrescent flesh of his own face. The image in the glass mimicked his action—his hands tore into necrotic muscle, pulling chunks of tissue off oozing bone. Teeth hung by leathery threads, clots of slime ran down, covering his arms. He screamed, but no sound came.

The bare bulb over the mirror changed hue in rapid succession—white, yellow, orange, pink—rendering the psychotic cadaver in the mirror even more surreal, more demonic. The bulb sparked and exploded with an intense shower of light. Marty turned and ran back toward the living room.

But somewhere on his way through the kitchen, time began to alter.

He started to feel himself moving slower and slower, as if he were trying to run through water. As if the density of his body and the density of the air were similar. As if his feet had no traction on the ground. As if, somehow, he kept halving the distance between himself and the doorway, but could never get all the way to breach that final fraction.

Slower and slower. His legs began to ache with the effort; he was barely able to draw breath. A sound, like time stretching, surrounded him, filled his head to cracking . . . and then, he stopped altogether.

Froze completely. He stood in mid-stride, one leg up, mouth open, frozen solid. Immobile as stone. And everything around him seemed equally rigid, as if someone had taken a picture of the room with him walking across it, and this was the picture.

He could see; he could not move his eyes. He could hear, but the silence of deep space enclosed him. He could think—but what was he to think of all this? Was he going mad? Had he fallen into the postulated black hole?

The stillness was incomprehensible. It pervaded the very air he . . . didn't breathe. Inert. The fixedness went on, and on, and on . . . how long is a time of no time? No time, no motion, no sound . . . but wait. There was a sound. A sound was coming.

A scrabbling sound of the finest timbre, almost inaudible at first, almost the hallucination of sound. But then it came louder, louder, but no less fine. The sound of dragonfly wings scraping over sandpaper, or dry leaves blown across soft earth, or spider feet tapping over a lineoleum floor. Marty looked straight ahead, in the only direction his fixed gaze allowed him to look. Spiders were coming.

Only a few at first, walking tentatively on the hard waxed floor. Each spider lifted one leg, tested the strange slippery surface before it, advanced a centimeter, lifted the next leg. Only a few, of different sizes, approaching slowly. In Marty's entire universe, now, the only moving things were these spiders.

He tried to scream, or run, or flail at them; but, of course, could not. They came slowly, at first, these few, and shortly were joined by several more. Different sizes, different shapes, different colors. Some were hairy, with thick, deliberate legs, and a coarse mat of black bristles. Some were shiny hard, with a body almost like a carapace. Some had thin, spindly legs, some had pincerlike jaws, some had prickles. Some scurried.

More spiders arrived. Still slowly, they came forward, black and yellow ones, brown fuzzy ones with violin markings on their backs, polished black ones with red hourglass designs. Puffball spiders that could hardly walk across the flat surface without wobbling back and forth, wolf spiders, daddy-longlegs, glistening spiders moist with spider slime, trapdoor spiders, tarantulas. A green-spotted *African Loxosceles*.

Dozens of them now, slowly advancing. Some were a little quicker than others; they climbed over the spiders in front of them. In one or two places, fights erupted: spiders clenched, rolling, sixteen legs wrapped frantically around deathly, glossy bodies, fangs piercing, venom flowing . . . and then one, or both, lay puckering on the floor, first spasmodic and then still, as the horde inched ahead.

Toward Marty. His mind twisted in the throes of violent terror; his body was a statue. Still, the spiders came. Like a swarm.

Suddenly, one of the nearest ones darted ahead—seized by spider-lust—and was quickly out of Marty's field of vision. He couldn't move his eyes, couldn't look down, couldn't see where this creeper was racing to so urgently, but then he knew that he could not only see and hear, he could feel, as well. He felt the spider crawling on his left foot.

Over the front of his ankle . . . pause . . . up the inside of his leg, inside his pants. It paused again around his knee.

If only he could scream. He wished to God he could scream. Hundreds of spiders flooded in the door, now, writhing over each other, bumping into each other, advancing. The first wave of them disappeared beneath the lower edge of Marty's peripheral visual field, coming steadily closer. He felt the spider at his left knee crawl gradually higher, up the inside of his thigh.

He prayed to lose consciousness.

Two more spiders suddenly skittered up his right leg. The shock was excruciating. A dozen more groped around his cuffs . . . and then they were countless, climbing, inside and outside his clothes. Over his back, now; up his neck. In his hair. They crawled, God, no, over his most sensitive recesses, exploring, leaving sticky trails of spittle, biting, defecating, masticating; some weaving webs, some falling off back down to the floor, only to climb again.

One burrowed into his right nostril, curled up into a ball, attacked any others who ventured into the same opening. They crawled into his mouth, under his tongue, into the depths of his throat. They lay eggs there.

The horror was overpowering—but Marty could not faint, could not die. The horror was at its infinite limit. And then the rats came.

The floor was thick with spiders, but the rats ran right over them, right up to Marty. They began chewing through his shoes—quickly accomplished—and then went on to gnawing his toes.

The pain was unbelievable, but somehow sensing that seemed to stir the rats into a greater frenzy. They nibbled up his shins, devoured his flesh, feasted on the torn skin and oozing muscle until he was nothing but an articulated skeleton of bloody, greasy bones. Then, for a long time, the rats lapped the bones.

Worms came. They crawled around Marty's bony fingers, between the scraping vertebrae. They wriggled into the marrow of the long bones, squirmed there, sucked the marrow, spewed their worm-juice, left the bony core to fester. They wormed into the eye sockets, into the ear holes, into the brain pan.

Somehow Marty could still feel, and see. Felt the worms wriggling in his bones. Saw his skeleton hand.

And as he watched, he dissolved. Bone resolved into molecules of bone, which dispersed into atoms of calcium, atoms of phosphorous, atoms of carbon. Became electrons spinning high above nearly imperceptible protons, vibrating neutrons, fundamental particles of energy that oscillated in the rarefied air of the timeless kitchen until .

. . Marty was no more. Invisible. Absent. Nonexistent.

Gone.

Ryan continued trying to read when Marty first got up to go into the kitchen, but staying awake had been a major effort for the better part of the previous hour, so within a couple of minutes, he was slipping into the hypnagogic state which is neither sleep nor wakefulness. His head lolled; a small trickle of saliva crept out the corner of his half-open mouth, down his chin; his eyelids were almost closed. He therefore wasn't conscious of the first purr of activity on the banks of equipment before him--the single, tentative BEEP on the oscilloscope.

Nor was Ryan aware of the vague, vibrating images on the monitors a few minutes later; the humming of readouts, the whirring of the automatically triggered tapedecks. Or of the faint glow at the top of the stairs.

Magnometer needles were deflecting off the screen; the barometer started to fall. Ryan was in full doze now. The faint light at the top of the stairs grew brighter, became blue-green, took shape; began to descend.

From the nether consciousness of his light sleep, Ryan became aware first that he was being awakened, then that he was being awakened by something, then that the something was a pressure on his shoulder. A hand.

He jumped awake and swiveled around—to find Marty standing behind him. He shined his flashlight into Marty's face: what he saw was raw wonder, pale amazement on his friend's expression. Marty had rejuvenated, but now was in shock. Ryan turned again, to follow the direction of the technician's wide, staring gaze—followed the gaze to where it was fixated, at the top of the stairs.

There, halfway down by now, was a greenish, glowing, crawling mass, resembling a giant hand, its potent, searching fingers flowing down the stairs—heading directly toward Ryan and Marty. They both took two steps backward.

Marty opened his mouth to shout, but could not find the breath. Ryan was unable to move. The air became thin, charged. The monitors were going wild. Ceaselessly, the thing came.

Finally Ryan found his voice, in a whisper. "It's manifesting! Look at the 'scope!"

Marty bobbed his head. "Trip wire's activated! Temperature's dropping!"

"This is for real! This is really happening!"

“Can you breathe?”

“Can you run?”

“I’m workin’ on it, man.”

The smoking fingertips reached the bottom of the stairs, then suddenly rose to the hall ceiling. A pulsing tentacle came forward, floated down again, hovered above the camera, arched like a cobra, withdrew.

The fingers collected themselves into a fist, which slowly grew. When the hand opened again, it was twice as big. It settled to the floor once more; indistinctly, it crept forward.

Something in Marty snapped. His mouth opened, closed, opened, closed. Then he shouted.

Everyone in the living room sprang up. Diane grabbed Robbie and hugged him before she even saw what was happening. Dr. Lesh put on her glasses to focus on the cause of the disturbance. The cause was among them. The hand was in the living room.

The hand wandered aimlessly, passing under tables, circling chairs. Like a mist with substance. The room was cold and damp. Nobody moved.

“Have you experienced this before?” Lesh asked anybody.

“First time,” breathed Diane.

“Me too.”

The mist rose and fell like a tide. Random flashes ignited in its substance, like tiny exploding lights or alien nerve cells discharging electrically. Almost as if the mist were thinking.

“This is . . . awesome,” Lesh murmured.

“This is nothin’ compared to what I been through in the kitchen,” rasped Marty.

But nobody was listening to Marty—they were all transfixed. The vapor roamed about like luminescent breath, sea-green now, sparking and fuming. Exploring the living room, it seemed sentient, somehow, yet lost. Seeking something, unable to find its way out.

Lesh backed away from a tendril that curled near her. “Don’t let it touch you,” she whispered. “But try not to disturb it. I think—I feel—it wants something . . . but isn’t certain what.”

“You’re . . . just projecting, Dr. Lesh,” Ryan squeaked. He stood stock-still as the smoke coiled around his legs, up along his back and down again. “See?” he choked out as the thing left him. “I’m okay. Nothing happened to me.” He hoped dearly that saying it made it so.

Marty was near the end of his rope, after first decomposing beside

the refrigerator and now watching this living fume in the living room. Slowly, he backed down the hallway, out of the fog's path, toward the small guest bathroom.

Diane still clutched Robbie tightly. She'd never seen anything like this . . . fog . . . before, and was uncertain how to react. It was wondrous, whatever it was, even dazzling. Yet it was all tied up in her child's disappearance—was somehow dangerous, and frightening as well. But she didn't want to do the wrong thing: perhaps how she behaved or responded to this—whatever it was—would determine the fate of her baby. Maybe she needed to be brave, or be brassy. Or humble. Or . . . what? She was virtually paralyzed with possibilities, so she just stood there, ready for anything, holding her son.

Steve was both more scared than Diane was, and more angry. He was a meat-and-potatoes man by nature, and this fantasy-come-real was just not in his universe. It was way out of bounds. He almost couldn't believe he was seeing what he was seeing—but there it was. He was seeing it.

So Steve's emotional state was as much a function of this disruption of the natural order of things as it was related to his missing child and unsettled household. He was wary of this lingering mist, and furious at it. And finally, his anger and his wariness made him believe it existed.

But the crawling mist wasn't the most fantastic occurrence Steve had to accept before the night was over. For at that moment, a series of sparkles glittered in the air near the ceiling, where the jewelry had materialized previously, and something new appeared.

Something. A darkness, without shape. A formless damping of light. Its dimensions kept changing. And the darkness moved.

Floated through the air, paused, hovered, rose, circled, paused again. Like—very like—a creature of shadow, examining a new place.

Lesh felt an icy, cold fear run through her for the first time that night. She'd never seen or read of anything like this shadowy shapelessness in her life, but she'd heard of it only yesterday. From Tangina. Something the psychic had seen in her dream . . . what had she said?—*One is a shadow. A darkling creature I cannot comprehend. He is himself a conduit to another plane*.

So here it was now. To Lesh, it had the sickening, terrible sense of déjà vu about it. Half remembered, half repressed. It was a sinking feeling, like falling in space. This creature was the mouth to nowhere.

"Stay away from it," Lesh whispered with desperate urgency. "Don't let it near you. It's . . . I think it's a tunnel to a different universe."

Fear instantly crackled, static, electric.

Ryan tensed. "You mean . . . like a black hole? Black holes don't move like that—this thing is alive. Besides, if a black hole was that big, it would have sucked in half the state by now."

"I don't know what a black hole is, and I don't know what *this* is," Lesh said carefully. "But Tangina said it was a 'conduit to another plane,' and I don't like it."

Nobody liked it. It was cold; it was unfathomable. It moved. It even seemed to have a certain sound about it, or perhaps it was an absence of sound. A sort of un-laughter.

It moved to a chair. It settled on the cushion. It moved on to the dining room table. The chair cushion was gone.

Vanished from where it had been sitting, as if it had been absorbed by the shadow-creature. Eaten.

The shadow-creature left the area of the dining room table. It began to migrate toward Diane.

"No!" she whispered, immediately almost out of control. Her face pulled taut; she gripped Robbie frantically. She couldn't move a step. "No," she whimpered.

The shadow came closer.

Suddenly there was another profusion of sparks near the ceiling . . . and a flame appeared. Appeared and grew, until it was the size, and vaguely the shape, of a man. A flame-creature, orange, pulsing, liquid. It soared down into the dining room like a fireball. It confronted the shadow.

They danced. At least, it looked like a dance. They touched, they parted, they spun, they entwined. The flame-creature chattered in some ethereal flame-language, like a burning wind; perhaps it was a song.

They all stared at the scene, unutterably riveted. The room had become a stage for this inconceivable performance.

Softly, Lesh spoke. "Tangina *saw* this."

Diane was dizzy with trying to grasp meanings. "These are Carol Anne's dreams," she puzzled. "Carol Anne's dreams have come to life."

Lesh shook her head. "I think they were already alive when Carol Anne dreamed of them."

"What should we *do*?" Ryan pressed.

"Do?" Lesh raised her brow. "What an arrogant thought." She redirected her attention to the dancers.

The flame-being changed colors, from orange to red to yellow to white, to blue-white, to green-white, to orange-white. His shape

changed intermittently, too: now he resembled a wing, now a meteorite. Now a shower of flames. He talked in fire-babble to the darksome thing; the shadow-creature answered in shadow-laugh.

And all during the dance, the green mist kept circling the floor—wandering aimlessly, settling in corners, redoubling on itself.

The dance grew wilder. The fire blazed, the umbra darkened. The room was becoming febrile with excitement, when all at once the shadow snuffed out the whirling conflagration . . . and everything was dark and still and quiet—save the phosphorescent mist that oozed along the floor, and the heartless shadow-laughing of the shadow.

But in a moment the quenchless flame-thing reerupted, just behind the lightless creature, and, throwing such an intense brightness, the fire almost defined a silhouette around the shadow, almost something like a shape revealed. At once, the two were off and reeling, though, mysterious as ever.

"I wonder who does their choreography," Ryan managed to joke. He said it to try to relieve his own tension. It only served to cue his next cause for dismay.

With yet another flourish of tiny flashes near the ceiling, another creature materialized. Thick, solid, it looked arguably like the trunk of a gnarled tree. Dense, knobbly bark covered it from bottom, where it seemed to be growing out of the floor, to top, where it seemed to be growing into the ceiling. Half a dozen branches groped blindly into the room; ancient, garbled sounds hovered about its incrustations.

Robbie screamed, certain this was his fearsome oak tree, returned to snag him again. Perhaps it was. In any case, the boy's wail was cut short by the flame-creature, who broke from his shadow-partner to attack the tree.

The flame-creature soared in and out among the branches, igniting them anew with each pass. The fire-song sounded full of anger, now, a sucking blast-furnace noise. The burning tree limbs writhed and moaned, and twisted and tore at their singed twigs. The flame flew in again, and embraced the trunk. Muffled groans issued from the tree; when finally it was able to break from the fire's forced caress, it was seared black on one side, and smoking.

The shadow raced forward and engulfed the smoke—absorbed it, claimed it for its own. The tree growled, then contorted, cracking the ceiling.

The iridescent vapor still meandered on the floor.

The stunned humans were by now far too rattled to speak, or even move.

The tree, flame, and shadow continued their drama, toward what conclusion the stars, perhaps, knew.

Marty made it safely into the bathroom at the end of the hall and huddled there, panting. That glistening green mist creeping all over was the last straw for him. No more. He was surprised he hadn't already died of fright. This was carrying on-the-job training too far, as far as he was concerned. Green flashing fog, right. He would just stay exactly where he was for the rest of the night, say thank-you-very-much in the A.M., and write his memoirs on the plane home.

He turned on the light, put the lid down on the john, and sat there until his breathing regularized. There, that was better. Strange noises filtered through from the living room, but he didn't want to know what they were. He shut the bathroom door. And locked it.

Now what? He looked around the small, clean room. White porcelain sink, white porcelain toilet, white semigloss walls, white tiled floor, white toilet paper, white Ivory soap, white ceiling fixture. On one wall hung a picture, a watercolor of red California poppies, framed and under glass. Over the sink was a wall mirror hiding a medicine cabinet—but Marty wasn't about to look in any more mirrors tonight. He just smiled and sat, waiting for morning to arrive.

He began to tap his fingers against the side of the bowl. He hummed a little tune. Queer sounds crept under the door; he hummed louder. It seemed to be getting chilly; there was a draft, or something. He pulled his collar up around his neck, then went back to tapping out a rhythm on the porcelain. Oops—he tapped his index finger against something sticky on the edge of the toilet. *Nice going, Marty, right on target.* He touched his finger to his thumb to get a better feel: very sticky. With a sickly smile, he brought his hand up to his face, to see what the stuff was.

His hand was melting.

He jumped back so hard he knocked the top off the tank of the toilet; it clattered to the floor. With primal horror, he stared at his hands: both were melting slowly, the fingers elongating, the skin dripping, waxen, puddling on the tile. Marty began to pant again. He slid off the toilet seat and landed, with a bump, on the linoleum.

Wild-eyed, he swiveled his head, looking from corner to corner for a clue to his predicament. No clues. Eerily, his forearms began to stretch, as if they were made of putty. Longer, and thinner; three times their normal length, so that when he rested his knuckles on the floor beside him, his elbows stuck high in the air, higher than his head, almost like huge spider legs.

That gave him a momentary horrific image, and he looked down—

but no, he was not a spider.

Yet he did feel . . . strange. Sort of . . . powerful, actually. Totally alert, mind speeding along like a razor, like he'd just done half a gram of coke. Marty smiled slyly, brought his knees up to his chest, leaned back against the wall. He wasn't certain, but it sure felt like he was getting bigger. Maybe a lot bigger. He heard the seam of his pants rip down the back. He smiled again. A well of saliva brimmed over his lower lip, drooled in a long string down to the floor, collected there in a pool. He bent his head down and licked the spittle off the floor. That was easy, for his neck had become longer, and angled forward somewhat, and his jaws protruded a bit, in a kind of snout. So it was easy to lean down and lick up the spit. Easy, and he liked it.

His shirt tore open. This made Marty laugh, but only a hissing sound came out. He delighted in the sound. Khhhhhhhh. He expanded again; his clothes fell off in shreds. They thought they could hide him in clothes, the fools. They would soon see their folly. He would show them his face.

He looked around the room. What did he want? Something. He lifted the toilet lid beside him with his four-inch talons. He lowered his head into the bowl and lapped a few times. No, something else.

He looked up at the mirror on the wall. Rage suddenly roared through him like a flash fire: he hated mirrors. With a single movement, he rose and smashed the glass with the back of his reptilian hand. It shattered into pieces, shards flying everywhere. He breathed heavily a minute, then picked up one of the larger slivers and ate it. The glass was good.

Marty ate all the medicine bottles in the cabinet. He tore the picture off the wall, ate pieces of the picture. He felt better now. He scratched himself, vaguely excited. Noises from the front of the house attracted his attention. He pulled the bathroom door open without bothering to unlock it, and walked his hobbling walk down the hall toward the living room.

In the living room, the flame and shadow circled the tree, while the people watched, enrapt. All at once, a low snarling sound attracted everyone's attention to the hallway: in the darkness there, a figure was approaching.

The tree, flame, and shadow beings saw it at the same time—and appeared to go into a frenzy. The flame leaped into the shadow, and was gone; the shadow engulfed the tree, which disappeared; and then the shadow sailed up the stairwell, and vanished . . . into the shadows.

Lesh and the others stared at the hallway, where the shape was

coming closer. It rapidly emerged into the half-light of the television glare: there, naked, slobbering, waddling like an orangutan . . . was Marty. Back from metamorphosis.

Marty stopped when he reached the group, stood erect, and looked confused. “Why’s everyone staring at me?” he demanded.

Before anyone could give an answer, something magnificent happened—the most magnificent happening of all this strange and awefull night. A woman appeared on the stairs.

The apparition of a woman. Tall, graceful, in a majestic turn-of-the-century gown, she floated down the stairs, surrounded by twenty hovering, gleaming lights. Magnificent because she was so beautiful; though none could exactly have described her face, and her eyes were dark as another time. Magnificent because she was so real—just who were bold might have reached out and touched her; though none were so bold. Magnificent, because she was a ghost.

The previous manifestations were wondrous, to be sure, but so bizarre, so essentially unnameable, as to be more hallucinatory than not, in the minds of the observers. Already, Lesh was wondering to herself: Did that just happen? Was it real?

But this woman—this was simply a truth. She was here. And the gravity of her sheer presence was overpowering.

She walked—or rather, wafted—among them, now. The scintillations around her moved wherever she moved, testing the air, drifting away from time to time, then returning to her. After-images—except that they were fore-images—preceded the woman each time she glided somewhere, as if she were somehow being led by her own flow.

Her ectoplasmic arms stretched out, periodically, into long, thin tendrils that reached across the room to test various objects, to palpate, to sense, and then withdraw back to her sides. She was constantly extending herself in that way, in fact—sometimes actually dissolving momentarily, to reconstitute a second later with a swirling, regathering of smoke.

So real, so haunting. They all watched her gauzy form move from chair to camera to curtain, and not a one of them didn’t hope to be so touched. Each felt thrilled, enthralled, and not a little struck by magic.

Motionless, they stood, as the woman wandered. Then, as they watched, she paused: the ephemeral blue-green mist that formed her seemed to congeal; her head enlarged, her eyes grew blacker; lips pulled back in demon snarl; arms rose up—and, as they watched, it seemed that something beastly welled within her, started to emerge. Chill fear settled in their hearts.

The room got colder. Everyone turned in different directions to see what was happening, when all of a sudden every light bulb in the place came on. The lights grew brighter each second, quickly reaching an intensity that was blinding, impossible to bear. Everyone in the room covered their eyes. Marty was screaming again. Electrical smoke filled the air; sparks crackled. The whine of audio feedback rose rapidly to overload volume.

“Smells like a short!” Steve cried out.

“It’s going to explode!”

The frequency of the feedback reached a horrendously high pitch, intensely loud, until, cathartically, an enormous BOOM rolled through the house; the misty spirit, along with all the glimmering lights, got vehemently sucked up into the bilocation point, and once more all was quiet, all was dark. The episode was over.

Dr. Lesh broke the silence. “Roll the tape back.” Her voice was tense, controlled.

Ryan hit the rewind switches on the VTRs as the others felt themselves for signs of injury, and slowly collected around the monitors. Marty sat where he was, naked on the floor, hyperventilating, but otherwise appearing well and unharmed.

“I think it recorded,” Ryan muttered, as he fiddled with various switches and buttons. “I think we got one on tape. Yes. Yes! We got it recorded!”

The two monitors played back their videotapes simultaneously—one a visible spectrum, one a special lens that had captured part of the infrared range and played it back on thermographic tape.

Everyone watched the monitors closely. Neither tape demonstrated the flame-creature, the shadow-thing, or the tree-being. They just weren’t there. Neither was the turquoise mist, nor the vapor, nor the smoke. What *was* there, though, was miraculous. What was there, was people.

Sheer, diaphanous forms, walking slowly down the stairs. At the same speed, and in the same places that the mist had gone, so these ghost-people walked. And in the center of each chest, a light glowed—in the same positions as the lights had been flashing and glowing in the mist, when the thing had first oozed its way downstairs.

All kinds of people walked this vapor trail. An old man, bent and weary. A little girl—not Carol Anne—looked around as if she were lost, as if she didn’t even see the old man. Aimlessly, she wandered around the living room.

All at once, four more manifestations appeared on the screen. Large,

grisly men, dressed in burlap coats, floppy hats, and riding boots, huddled in one corner, facing away from the camera. A woman walked on-screen, dressed like a flapper of the twenties. She moved this way and that, as if looking for a door, tears streaming down her face.

Several more people appeared now: an infant, crunched up in a ball and screaming silently; two bloody toughs, repeatedly stabbing each other with knives; an old woman in a wedding dress.

People of all ages and descriptions floated dreamily across the picture tube. Lost, directionless, these sad spectres followed the same path as the smoky ectoplasm had done earlier. Restless ghosts.

The same images played on the infrared monitor, though they registered in wildly different colors on the screen, recording temperatures as well as wavelengths. They were cold, these phantasms.

Rarely did a manifestation make contact with any other—they didn't even seem to be aware that the others existed. Some even stared directly at the camera, without showing evidence that they knew it was there. A young man approached the lens, and evaporated.

The spirit-woman entered the screen. Where twenty lights had encircled her before, now were twenty souls, faint attendant spirits who accompanied their ghostly mistress like a ghostly court. The spirit-woman moved among her minions, queenly, graciously aloof; even on tape, a dazzling spectre.

Almost whimsically, she stared out of the monitor; floated closer, filled the picture; paused; came closer, still, until the whole screen darkened, turned black. The murky image of the woman shifted shape within the darkness, horribly transformed: two bright glowing spots appeared, then pulled back: they were eyes. Eyes in the center of a lightless, shapeless head—shapeless, but vile. Gradually the head resolved itself until it could be dimly seen, though still the shape was difficult to gauge. For it was the grinning face of rank chaos, horror incarnate. Madness embodied.

And beyond it, in the background, its shadow: the shadow of the Beast.

Marty held his breath as he stared at the image, for this was the thing he briefly had become.

Diane grabbed Robbie, covered his eyes, and screamed—continuously, uncontrollably: a sound from the bottom of the pit.

Steve stepped in forcibly between Diane and the monitor, preventing her from seeing that from which she could not look away.

“That thing is in there with my baby!” Diane wailed. “That thing! That thing!”

Dr. Lesh continued staring at the screen, an expression of total despair on her face. “My God,” she whispered to herself. “There are hundreds.”

Steve wrapped his strong arms around Diane, enfolding her, until her screams became sobs, and finally subsided into muffled chokes. Gently, he stroked the back of her head. Then he stooped to pick up Robbie, standing beside him, and included the boy in the tight, long embrace.

Lesh and her assistants looked on in silence. The tape ended. All was quiet.

For a minute, nobody moved. Then Dr. Lesh roused herself, crossed over to the videotape recorders, removed the tapes, put them in her briefcase. And locked it.

CHAPTER 6

A brilliant morning sun blazed through the kitchen window, falling in parallelogram patches over the linoleum floor. The day was already warm; the night was gone.

Robbie walked into the kitchen with a big sigh, all dressed in clean clothes, his hair still wet from combing. “I’m ready,” he called.

“Tell Gramma to call the very second you walk in,” Diane instructed him, as she wiped her hands dry on the dish towel.

“Taxi’s here,” Steve shouted from the hall.

Diane squatted down and straightened Robbie’s collar. “Now don’t be scared of the taxi man; he’s a friend of Daddy’s and mine.”

“I’m eight years old, gimme a break.” Robbie was getting a little annoyed about all this fussing. Ghosts were one thing—a taxi ride to his grandmother’s, he could handle.

“That’s what I like to hear,” boomed Steve, entering from the hallway. “Let’s move out! You’re about to have yourself a real adventure.”

“I don’t need no more adventure. I need to get some sleep.”

They walked together to the front door. There Robbie picked up a small, eight-year-old-sized suitcase in one hand, and, in the other, a leash with E. Buzz on the end of it.

Robbie exited the doorway. Steve moved to follow, to help with the bag, but the boy waved him off. “I can do it myself. ’Bye.”

“ ’Bye, sweetheart,” Diane called from the entrance way. “Call us.” She held on to her tears as child and dog climbed into the taxi. E. Buzz barked. The cab pulled away from the curb.

Steve went into the living room to talk to Ryan. Diane went back into the kitchen. Sitting at the table was Dr. Lesh, sorting through the collection of trinkets and paraphernalia that had materialized in mid-air the evening before. Brooches, stickpins, cameos, hair combs, brass buttons, cuff links, teeth, bones, coins, and lockets. Like fossilized remains, they gave intimations of long-dead lives. Physical shadows of the past.

“This cameo,” said Dr. Lesh, holding it up to the light, “one hundred years old.”

Diane sat down beside her, and began sifting through some of the

jewelry, “Some haul, huh?” She gestured upstairs: “Maybe they’re afraid we’ll sue them, and this is their idea of an out-of-court settlement.”

Lesh held up a twist-o-flex digital wristwatch. “And this enigma . . . not more than a couple of years old. And not your husband’s?”

“He said it wasn’t.”

“I’ve heard about jewelry or perfume disappearing from a vanity in one room, later to reappear in another, but . . . but this doesn’t fit into any construct I’ve ever experienced, or heard of.”

“Has anything, lately?”

“No, I suppose not.” Lesh smiled. She’d grown tremendously fond of, and impressed with, this family during the brief time she’d shared their ordeal. Diane, in particular, seemed so strong to Lesh—refusing to abandon her baby in the face of this insanity, permitting her emotions to have full rein, yet not letting them paralyze or totally inundate her. And now, just the next morning: wearing a clean, yellow dress, Diane was bright and fresh, and even sarcastic.

Steve entered the kitchen. “Okay, gang, what’s for breakfast?”

Dr. Lesh stood, took off her glasses, smoothed out her dress. “Well, I’m off.” She put the artifacts into a bag. “I’ll take these back to the lab, along with the tapes. I’ve got to look in on Tangina, to see how she’s doing . . . Then, I’ve just been on the phone, setting up a Human Research Committee meeting for this afternoon—I’ll present all the evidence; we’ll see if anyone has any suggestions . . .” She paused, had a second thought, then went on a shade more tentatively. “I’ll have to display these, you know.”

Steve smiled grimly. “Just please not on ‘Sixty Minutes.’ ”

“Or . . . ‘That’s Incredible’?” added Diane.

Martha laughed. “Not even on ‘Upstairs, Downstairs.’ ” She began walking toward the door. “I’m leaving Ryan here with you—I’ll return tonight. Marty won’t be coming back, did you know?”

“Yeah, he told me that after he watched his face fall off last night, he decided to get a day job.” Steve chuckled.

“He told me it was the worst acid flashback he’d ever had,” Diane commiserated. “Poor kid.”

“Well, in any case, he’s promised not to talk about this for several weeks. After that, we’re all on our own.”

The front doorbell rang just then. “I’ll get it,” said Steve. It made him feel somehow relieved, this doorbell. It was such a normal, familiar, suburban sound: people were out there, playing golf, driving to the store, ringing doorbells—doing the things that people do.

Hearing the bell somehow made him part of all that again.

With a light foot, he crossed the hall and opened the front door. Instantly he felt uncomfortable. Standing there was Frank Teague, briefcase in hand.

“Morning, Steve.”

“Morning, Frank.” Of all the people Steve didn’t want to see, Frank topped the list—Teague was not only suspicious by nature, he had rather distinct ideas about what constituted appropriate behavior among employees. And Steve just didn’t feel as if he was being on his best behavior.

“Missed you at the office the last couple days, Steve. Nothing wrong, is there?”

“No, no, no. Everything’s fine. Fine.”

“The fellows were worried, you know, after you called in sick, so I took it upon myself to . . .” He stepped a little closer, to scrutinize Steve’s appearance. “Jesus, Steve, you look like shit. Aren’t you feeling any better?”

Steve felt like nothing so much as a schoolboy caught playing hooky. “Well . . . now you mention it, I am still a little weak . . . this particular strain of flu’s not so easy to get rid of. I swear, the minute you’re back on your feet . . . it, uh . . . it’s back with you.”

Teague peered past Steve into the living room. All the equipment was still up: cables, tracking across the floor. Three television monitors could be seen, tuned to static. Steve saw Teague eyeing the disarray, and subtly shifted his weight so as to block his boss’s view.

Teague moved, too, not so inconspicuously trying to get a glimpse around Steve’s other side. “Looks like your cable is out, there,” he offered.

“Cable? Yes, the cable. Yes. We’ve had no TV for several days.”

“Well, we should look into that. Any other houses on the block dark?” Suspicion clouded his voice.

“Uh, no, no . . . just us. Just us.”

At the far end of the living room, the upright piano slid four feet, gently bumping into the couch, emitting a sustained, discordant vibration. Teague didn’t see it, but the noise made him furrow his brow. Steve immediately stepped outside and closed the door behind him.

Instantly, the porch light came on, then increased in intensity to such a level it was dazzling, even in the full daylight. Steve laughed nervously.

Teague squinted at the bulb. “Looks like you’ve got a *number* of electrical problems in the house, here. What’s that you got screwed in there, a three-hundred-watt bulb? You afraid of prowlers—in this neighborhood? Or you just trying to attract every insect in Cuesta Verde?” he laughed.

Steve laughed.

“Well?” Teague prodded after a moment.

“Yes, oh that, we, uh, left it on for the delivery boy . . . for the groceries. That is, my, uh, wife’s not feeling well, either. Yes, she’s got a little of my bug.”

Teague looked hard at Steve, as if he were trying to decide something. When he finally spoke, his tone was more serious than it had been; more intimate, even. “Steve, tell me something, are you happy here? I hope you don’t resent my leaping out to ask these things. I haven’t ever said this, but you’re our best rep—we wouldn’t want to lose you to either the flu, or . . . other ‘opportunities.’ I’m not sure what I’m saying, now . . . but all that hardware and software set up in your living room made me wonder whether you’ve got a little something going on the side.”

Steve flushed. “Just hobbies. *Popular Mechanics*.”

“Uh huh.” Teague nodded, not quite satisfied, uncertain whether to pursue the issue. “On the way over just now, Tuthill’s wife stopped me on the curb—on some pretense, the old gossip—but she told me she heard . . . funny noises over here last night. I don’t put stock in anything she says, of course . . . but she said she thought it sounded like a scream.”

Steve felt the blood rush from his head; it was a moment before he got a grip on himself. “Feedback,” he nodded apologetically. “Jeez, I’m really sorry it carried that far—all that audio equipment in there, you know, it gets away from you sometimes. Blew a tube, in fact. I’ll try to keep it down from now on, though—Diane yelled at me about it, too.” He smiled sickly.

Teague seemed to relax at that, seemed to come to a decision. “Are you up to a little ride? I want to show you something.”

Lesh drove back to the university, Steve went off with Teague, Ryan took a nap on the couch. Diane was exhausted.

For a while she tried to busy herself, hanging on desperately to all of her small, tangible realities—she finished putting the dishes in the dishwasher; she swept up fragments of broken pottery, fragments of her broken life.

She went upstairs, straightened up in Dana's room, found a *Playgirl* among the haphazardly strewn fan magazines, leafed through it, put it back.

She walked out into the hall and stopped beside the closed door to the kids' room. Always closed, now, always locked. Why was this happening to them? She put her ear to the door. Silent as a tomb.

"Hello," called Diane. "Anyone there? Carol Anne?" She rapped softly. Still, silence.

With terrible ambivalence, she put her hand down to the knob, safe in the knowledge that it was locked, that it would not open to her, yet filled with dread at the thought of what might be happening inside—put her hand down to the knob . . . and it turned.

She gasped, falling back, staring at the handle. For a minute, she didn't move. Her heart pounded; her eyes welled up. She hesitated, then slowly began to open the door. One inch. Two inches. There was all at once a ferocious roar from inside the room—a hideous growl that slammed the door shut with pure vehemence. Diane jumped with a quick response, teary, jangled, apologetic, unstrung. Without turning, she backed down the hallway into her own bedroom and shut the door.

That was her last ounce of strength, though. She'd been running on thin energy anyway, and this was the jolt that sapped even that insubstantial source. Suddenly, now the exhaustion of all those hours of sleepless horror came rushing around, engulfing her in weariness. She sank to her bed as if drugged, and, within a minute, was heavily asleep.

The bedroom windows were closed. Nonetheless, briefly, the curtains moved as if teased by a small wind, then hung still once more. But of that, sleeping Diane was unaware.

She lay, snoring softly, on her belly, still wearing the yellow cotton shift she'd put on earlier. Making up for lots of lost sleep and dreams. So she didn't hear the bed creak, either.

The mattress indented slightly all of a sudden—formed a shallow, distinct concavity, distinct, but queerly shaped—beside and behind the sleeping woman. A foul, salty odor settled over the bed. Diane's dress began to slide up.

Inch by inch the wrinkled hem rose, above her knees, past her thighs, over her hips. The material doubled against itself at the middle of her back, but kept rising higher, until the bottom of the dress was pulled up on top of her head, like a gay, yellow shroud, leaving her practically bare from the waist down.

Her legs were completely flaccid, but somehow, they moved: straightened, pulled apart. The flesh of her thighs was kneaded by invisible manipulations—pushed in, squeezed; two tiny half-moon nail marks suddenly appeared at the crease of her left buttock.

With a snort, she twitched once, roused a bit; her snoring stopped. She turned slightly, breathed deeply a few times, then settled back into sleep. For fifteen minutes, nothing else happened.

Then there were the fingers again, unseen, poking, prying. Her cotton briefs were pulled to the side; her skin stretched tight.

Gutteral sounds rose like bubbling sewer gas over the bed, but did not waken her. For sleep was her last refuge.

All afternoon, she slept.

* * *

Steve stood atop a dry hill with Teague, overlooking the entire expanse of Cuesta Verde Estates. Behind them sat Teague's Bronco, and beyond that, nothing but miles and miles of rolling scrub land. But before them was Cuesta Verde, all green and modern and productive and consumptive.

"I'm so very proud of this place," Teague said with feeling.

"I've been up here once or twice. Diane calls it 'Vanity Point.' " Steve squinted down at the neat little rows of homes. Smoke curled out of one or two chimneys; tiny children ran around chasing imaginary villains; the random disembodied HONK of a car got caught on the wind, was lifted into the hills for Steve to hear, or think he heard. There was something so human in this scene—so contemporary, yet so ageless—Steve couldn't help but feel a part of it. That feeling restored him somewhat, revitalized him.

Teague filled his chest with air. "So who's to say an artist shouldn't step back from his easel to admire the sum of his parts?"

Steve nodded, let his spirit glide for a few blessed minutes. "When they built our model home, there was nothing down there. Just freshly turned earth and a lotta wooden stakes, and miles and miles of string."

"One of your children was born in your house," Teague remembered.

Steve lost his wistful smile. "Carol Anne."

"I understand she's missed a lot of school lately. Trask's daughter's in the same nursery class. She have the flu, too?"

"Yeah. We've all got the same thing." *Demons*, he thought. Reality came crashing back into his brain.

"I'm sorry. I didn't see her."

"Oh, she's around."

"Are you?" The question was suddenly pointed, like a spear. It jarred Steve out of the last traces of his reverie.

"Am I what?" he queried from the dazed edge.

"Are you thinking of leaving Cuesta Verde?"

The question carried his thoughts back into the valley, to the homes and people to whom he felt so close. Yet here was distance, too. He reached his hand out in front of him—almost could touch the little community nestled in the hills below, as if it were a painting, just a few feet away—reached his hand out to touch it . . . but it wasn't there. It was miles away. Was it real at all? The air here seemed rarefied. Steve inhaled the sunshine, the earth-dust, the shimmering wind. "I can't believe how a day can be so beautiful." He spoke to the hills. "You wonder how anyone can have a problem in the world on a day like this."

Teague eyed him circumspectly, kicking up some sod with his heel. "Nice spot for a bay window, wouldn't you agree?"

"If you're living up here, great. Wouldn't be so terrific from the valley, looking up at a lotta houses cutting into these hills."

"You don't have to live in the valley anymore, you know."

"What are you getting at?" Steve regarded him sidelong.

"Phase Five of Cuesta Verde is going up right where we're standing, Steve. This could be your master bedroom suite. That could be your view. You interested?"

Steve was flustered. "Frank . . . Mr. Teague . . . that's a very generous offer. But I'm not a developer."

"You're responsible for forty-two percent of sales, almost half of sales, almost half of what we're looking at down there. Almost seventy million dollars of dwellings and property. Maybe a generation of security that no one can put a price tag on." He paused for effect. "We should have made you a full partner three years ago. I don't want to lose you now."

Steve almost reeled. So much was happening so quickly. Teague, all full of suspicion and innuendo, now brimming with generosity. His home, once his castle, now his hell. He felt suddenly blind, unable to reach the simplest conclusions, unskilled at reading the clearest signs. Maybe he'd had a stroke. Maybe he wasn't really even conscious at all right now.

But that was ridiculous. He knew who he was, and where he was. He knew his boss, Frank Teague, was standing beside him on top of a

sunny hill overlooking his past and his future, offering him a golden opportunity that two weeks ago would have meant a Hawaiian vacation and days of happiness. But what did it mean now? What did anything mean?

He turned and slowly began to walk, to try to sort it all out. Teague accompanied him. Just beyond the top of the next rise—barely twenty feet from where they'd been standing—spread a quiet little cemetery. Three acres of weatherworn headstones, surrounded by a low, broken picket fence, interspersed with poppies and baby's-breath.

Steve scratched his head, gesturing. "Not much room for expansion, looks like."

"We own the land." Teague wagged his head. "We've already made arrangements to relocate the cemetery."

Steve was a little taken aback. "Can you do that? I mean, isn't it rather . . . I don't know . . . sacrilegious?"

"Don't worry about it. It's not like an ancient tribal burial ground, or anything. It's just . . . people." Teague sloughed off the significance of the matter like dust on his lapel. "Besides," he added, in afterthought, "we've done it before."

Steve stopped walking. "When?"

"In seventy-six. Right down there." Teague was nonchalant.

"Cuesta Verde?" Steve was struck.

"All three hundred acres. It was quite a job, let me tell you."

Steve blinked. Was this the key that translated the code to the cryptogram his life had become? Was there, in fact, meaning to all this insanity? His mind raced. He wanted to shake Teague. "I never heard anything about it."

"Well, it's not something you go around advertising on billboards and the sides of buses." Teague chuckled broadly.

Steve was speechless. He looked back and forth between Cuesta Verde Estates below, and the cemetery behind him. Between the City of the Quick and the City of the Dead.

Unexpectedly, the sun slipped behind a cloud. The temperature fell precipitously in the dancing breeze. Steve couldn't stop staring, first in the one direction, then in the other.

Teague put his hands in his pockets against the sudden chill. He could see Steve's malaise, tried to put it away. "What are you worried about? You're not a religious fanatic or something, are you? It's no big deal, relatives and friends can go visit their loved ones at Broxton Memorial Park. It's only five minutes farther out, for Christ sake."

Steve answered quietly, almost to himself. "Five minutes. I guess that's no great hardship. I suppose that would be okay."

"Okay with who?" Teague looked perplexed.

"Whoever might complain."

Teague just smiled. "Nobody's complained yet."

In the iced light of dawn, Tangina prepared herself to do battle. She'd slept for twenty-four hours following her trance/ride with Lesh—all that next day, and the subsequent odious night. She'd slept deeply, to recuperate and to ready herself. And now she was ready.

Her powers were still not at their fullest, however—this was one reason she was attempting the clairaudience with the child during the daytime: the forces of darkness were at their ebb. There would be less interference now, in general, for many spirits went into repose during the light: there would be less astral traffic to distort Tangina's reception.

Quietly, she got up out of her hospital bed and walked to the door: no one in the hall, a few noncommittal shufflings in the nurses' station. Quietly, she closed her door. There was no lock on it, but nothing could be done about that. She only hoped nobody entered while she was in trance. She climbed back into bed. The door swung open, and a young man entered.

"Good morning, I'm Dr. Berman."

"Good morning," Tangina replied, with a rather tentative inflection.

"Am I disturbing you?"

"Well . . ."

"I could come back in half an hour."

Bother. Well, better to get it out of the way now, than to have this eager pup barging in later during the middle of her projection. "No, no, come in, please. What can I do for you?"

Berman sat down in a chair beside the bed, pulled out his pen and a hospital pad. "I'm the intern on this service. I just need to do a quick history and physical on you before rounds today."

"Fire away."

"Right. Well. What brings you here to the hospital?"

"I, well, I collapsed."

"Uh huh, and what were the circumstances? Had you been feeling ill prior to the collapse?" He jotted down a few notes on his pad.

"Ill? No. It was just a case of overexertion."

“Ah. What had you been doing?”

“Strangling a she-ghoul in the lavender tides of the twelfth astral plane.”

Berman stopped writing, put down his pen. “I see.”

“It was the end of a long night, I mean to tell you. What with trying to find the direction of the little girl’s cries, and then getting lost in the Gray Zone myself . . .”

“Ms. Barrons, are you taking medications of any kind? Oh, like Thorazine, or Haldol, or . . .”

Tangina laughed gaily. “Is that what you think? You think I’m a few bubbles off the plumb, is that it? God, I wish I were; it would make things a lot easier. I guess I *was* being a little previous with you just then. Well, all right. I’ll back up.” She regarded the intern with a sense of impossibility. “I doubt if you’ll understand, though.”

Dr. Berman poised his pen again, and smiled. “Try me.”

Tangina looked him over for the first time. Innocence radiated from his face—she was immediately intensely envious; she hadn’t enjoyed that state of grace for a long, long time. But she couldn’t really begrudge him his ingenuousness, it just gave her a pang of regret. She looked straight in his eye. “You’re kind of cute, actually.”

He blushed, put his pen down again. “Ms. Barrons . . .”

“Call me Tangina.”

“Tangina, I know I’m cute. You’re cute, too. There’s a nurse up on Five North, she’s real cute. But if you could just give me a quick run-down on the specific, physical events immediately preceding your collapse, I could get this all over with, and be out of your way.”

She smiled wanly. Too bad, she’d scared him. Too bad for her—she could have used a little touch from the Hand of Innocence. It would have helped her in her upcoming conflict, and it would have been a gust of fresh air for her to enjoy, as well. God knew, she’d had little enough rest from her tormenting devils lately—a brief interlude with this naive and pretty healer would have done wonders for her spirit.

But she’d scared him, she could see it—even though he was putting on such a cool facade: implacable in the face of delusional dwarves. Well, maybe she’d just have a little fun with him, anyway—shave some of the hard edges off the smugness in his demeanor. It would probably relax her to get playful. And she definitely needed to relax.

She closed her eyes.

“What are you doing?” Berman said skeptically, leaning forward.

“I’m reading you. You seem rather tense, Dr. Berman. It seems your

superior—Dr. Ellis? Dr. Elliot?—berated you yesterday, and you're concerned about your performance. There's also a lady on your mind —Julie, definitely Julie—a nurse, I believe—the one on Five North, I don't doubt—who has engendered mixed emotions revolving around . . . your gender." She smiled, opening her eyes, and looked a hint risqué. "Oh, my."

Berman couldn't help laughing. "You know, I don't believe any of that stuff. It's hocus-pocus. Anyone could have found out those names, and every intern in the hospital has the hots for Julie. So?"

Tangina arched her eyebrows. "I have a very strong image of you, all in fur—very like a great bear—and Miss Julie in something very brief and white, in flowing golden locks—Goldilocks?—wrapped around your—do you want me to go on?"

"Okay, okay, who told you about that? It must have been Julie. I can't believe she told you. It was . . ."

"Truly, she didn't tell me; I've never even met her. But don't get yourself so worked up, I . . ."

"Was there a camera in the room? What? I don't get it, if she . . ."

Tangina held up her hand. "Someone's coming."

Dr. Berman looked perplexed, turned around to view the door. No one there. He swiveled back to Tangina. "Look. No one's coming. And I'd like to know how you . . ."

She held up her hand again. "Wait."

He paused, looked at his watch, sighed. This was starting out to be one of Those Days. He opened his mouth to speak again, but she lifted her hand once more to stop him. She beamed. There was a knock on the door. Berman jumped.

"Come in," said Tangina.

A middle-aged woman entered, dressed in the uniform of a hospital volunteer. "Oh. I'm sorry, I don't want to intrude . . ."

"Not at all," Tangina assured her. "Please come in. Dr. Berman and I were just discussing fairy tales . . ."

Berman gave Tangina a look. The woman at the door took two more tentative steps into the room. She was clearly in a state of suppressed excitement. "I heard—I mean, one of the nurses just told me—you're a medium. Is that true, are you a medium?"

"Well, I'm usually a small, actually."

This only confused the woman, who apparently wasn't ready for jokes. Tangina took pity on her. "Well, I'm a small medium," she admitted.

The woman smiled. Berman shook his head with a defeated chuckle. “I’d call you a medium rare, actually,” he said.

“Why, thank you, Dr. Berman, how kind.” Tangina bowed her head. “You’re not such a bear after all.”

He graciously dipped his head in return. The woman took another step forward. “I was wondering . . . excuse me, my name is Louise Dreyer . . . I was wondering if . . .”

“You were wondering if I’d be willing to hold a seance for you . . . to . . . to . . . to locate someone. A missing relative, I think. Albert? Alfred? A long-lost brother?”

Louise Dreyer gasped, put her palm against her chest. “That’s . . . that’s unbelievable,” she aspirated.

Berman clapped. “Well done, medium!”

“I’m terribly sorry, Mrs. Dreyer,” Tangina apologized in earnest, “but, I’m rather involved in something now that requires all my concentration. Perhaps in a few months, if you still need assistance . . .”

“Yes . . . yes . . . of course.” Louise backed off. “Thank you. I’m sorry for bothering you now. Please excuse me. Yes, I’ll contact you again later.” She backed out the room and closed the door behind her.

Tangina sighed. “You see, Dr. Berman—among other things, it’s very alienating being a seer. People don’t relate to you as a person—they treat you with either fear, awe, or . . . condescension.”

Berman looked chagrined. “Touché. Sounds kind of like the way people treat doctors.”

“I never treat doctors that way.”

“I must say, you’ve given me an impressive display in just a few minutes.”

She shrugged. “I can’t carry a tune. Nobody asks for the talents they’re born with. And no one can learn to see what they don’t have eyes for. I can’t read an X-ray, for example.”

Dr. Berman leaned forward conspiratorially. “Frankly, Tangina, neither can I.” She smirked. He went on: “At least, that’s what Dr. Elgin told me yesterday.” They both laughed.

“Well,” she said finally. “You’ve stopped being so insolent, I suppose I can forego being so oblique. Let’s just say I was in an agitated psychological state, and passed out.”

“Fine”, sounds perfect,” he allowed, picking up his pen and writing again.

“I’d been in a hypnotic trance for . . . listen, how long is this going

to take?" she interrupted herself.

"Oh, fifteen minutes, maybe."

"And then how long before you all come back on your rounds?"

He checked his watch. "Probably not for a couple of hours."

She looked relieved. "Good. I'll have time, then."

"Time for what?"

"Oh . . . whatever." She threw him a mischievous grin.

"Look," he said, standing. "I'm sort of rushed right now, and I think I've got the basic idea on the history, so why don't I just do a brief exam, and then we can talk at length later on today."

"Fine," she nodded.

"Okay, why don't I just have you lie back down, here, and I'll get a listen to your heart . . ."

She lay down as he put on his stethoscope. He stood at the side of the bed, opened her hospital gown, placed the palm of his right hand upon her chest—over her heart, to feel for the strength and character of its impulse.

"Ah," she sighed. "Touched at last by the Hand of Innocence."

For the second time, he blushed.

When Dr. Berman left, ten minutes later, Tangina felt much better. She'd drawn strength from the intern's clearness of spirit, strength she knew she would need shortly. Nor had she depleted him, or sapped his spirit in any way by her drawing on it—if anything, he too was heartier for the interaction. Matters of spirit abided by different laws than matters of thermodynamics—augmentation of one factor in a relationship did not necessarily result in the diminution of its complement.

Not necessarily, but unpredictably—for there were times when one spirit *did* engorge at the expense of another. Such was her fear about the encounter she now faced. She hung a DO NOT DISTURB sign on the outside of her door, and got back in bed with a sigh of steadfast resolve.

It was a serious business, this one. It made her a little sick just to contemplate the extent to which she'd already become involved, and the depths to which she had yet to plunge before she could extricate herself from the affair. Experience told her she'd have to see it through, though, before she could be rid of it.

She'd gone so far so fast, this time—she wondered if her clairvoyance was becoming more acute. God, she hoped not. Perhaps

it was only the intensity of the trance Dr. Lesh had put her in which accounted for the hypersensitivity. She prayed that was the reason.

But these were idle considerations. It was time now to devote herself to the moment, to try to reach that poor little girl.

Scrying had for many years been Tangina's forte. She didn't have her crystal with her now, of course, but then, a crystal was not absolutely necessary; any reflective surface would do. She reached into her purse, and extracted a pearl-tinted marble she'd found between two cushions of the Freelings' couch the previous morning, as she'd lain there in a swoon. A *pearlie*, she'd heard children call it. This one belonged to Carol Anne.

She knew the girl's name clearly, now, had known it since the moment she'd entered the house. Knew the girl's aura, too. The aura was all over this marble.

With an air of forced calm, she raised the small glass orb to the tensor light above the hospital bed, and stared into its shattering stillness.

In her eyes, in her brain, the light grew. Grew denser, brighter; darker. Filled her; enclosed her. Until she was the reflection upon which she gazed.

On the hospital bed, Tangina began having shallow, rapid respirations. Her body became tonic—rigid, extended—and then went into a series of clonic spasms, resembling convulsions. Finally, she stopped moving altogether: no muscle tone, no breathing, barely a pulse. Anyone entering the room at that point would have thought her dead.

In fact, her consciousness was in violent motion. Dislocated from her corporeal state, she wandered, in astral projection, through the void. Her wandering demanded great focus; it was always different. Here, there was no vision, only sense.

"Carol Anne." Tangina's essence extended itself. "Carol Anne! Be!"

For an unknown time there was nothing. Only the ether-wind, harsh and directionless.

Then there was agonal death, clustered in a nether corner far below her; but it was sleeping for the moment, and she let it be.

She rushed quickly over a pit of glaucous horror—it snagged her, as she disregarded it too soon; but after a brief, painful struggle, she was able to extricate herself, and went on.

Disembodied singing, like crystal chimes, accompanied her for a while; hollow, gay.

A pseudopod exuded itself across her path. Too late to rise above it,

she pierced it instead, was caught in the sluggish ectoplasm. It tried to pull her apart, it wanted her to become one with it. She resisted the burning suffocation, though; concentrated on emerging . . . and broke clear.

Bits of it stuck to her, but the fantailing wind soon pulled them free. She lost her balance momentarily—went into a spin—and when she came out of it, she was on another level. It was black here.

Black, thick: like being in tar. No. Like being tar. Tangina was herself the substance of this dimension. Wandering was anguishingly slow, and without motive. Every millimeter took an eon to move.

But Tangina took advantage of the fact that she *was* this entity, and thus knew minutely its contours, surfaces, depths, textures—knew these things intuitively. She sensed all her borders: she was proximate to three different universes. She exuded a wavelength toward one. Flash! she was in another plane. But she knew this place. This was the place of shadows. This was Sceädu's domain.

There were many ways into a place, and many ways out, and many ways never out again. Tangina knew Sceädu would stalk her here, try to snare her; Sceädu, or his brothers. She must avoid this.

Cannily, she navigated the shadows. Some were deep, hauntingly chill, but empty. Some were thin; some, unexpected. One she approached with a discordant sense of foreboding, expecting any moment it would envelop her, suck her life away. She skirted it in mortal dread, but nothing happened.

One shadow looked small enough at first, but as she passed, it grew much bigger, much faster than she'd anticipated: she raced sideways, with all her power. Even so, she couldn't avoid being touched. The shadow left a nothingness in her where it had nicked.

She balked in horror; she feared the emptiness would grow, would absorb her from within. Dark shapes loomed on all sides, now. A clangor arose. She lost her equilibrium. In that moment, Sceädu descended.

Instinctively, Tangina toppled backward, and was through him before he could enshroud her. Out the other side she rolled, tumbling wildly into the plane of mist-layers and wandering souls. Carol Anne would be here.

Tangina continued to tumble. She saw Sceädu scamper off, suddenly prankish and evasive in this world. Fantabel streaked by in fiery pursuit. Tangina fell through one stratum of cloud cover, and, before she could regain her steadiness, was snagged by the branches of the tree-creature. And before she could extract herself, it devoured her.

Ageless darkness, ageless pain. She was within the corpus of the tree

—yet slowly was becoming that entity. Already she could feel a little of what it was to be this thing—she could feel enough to know she wanted to know no more. The desolation of the hoary creature was excruciating. Limbs twisted in ancient grief, seeking solace; time-worn bark made bark-thick sounds of woe, torment, ageless pain.

Fantabel whipped past, searing one branch, setting another afire. Tangina cringed—that part of her that was already the tree-being—in agony, her fingertips in flame. The tree desperately waved its branch, and the fire went out: Tangina's fingers throbbed with memory. Smoke rose from the blackened branches. Sceädu fluttered over, feasted on the smoke, then scuttled away, frolicsome, fugitive.

Tangina could not grasp the sense of it—the pain, the meaning, were incomprehensible. Yet only in meaning was there escape. Despair welled up in her.

No, she must not despair. This was not her hell; it belonged to another. To many others, perhaps. But not to Tangina. And not to Carol Anne.

Carol Anne, that was the crux. Carol Anne was the reason Tangina was here—the ache of the tree could not obscure that purpose. From the depths of her soul, Tangina cried out: "Carol Anne! Be! Carol Anne, deliver me from this ghastly wood."

Almost immediately she felt it: "Mommy. Mommy, where are you?"

A child's voice, Carol Anne's. It appeared to Tangina as a color, rather than a sound—a color that grew in tone, that Tangina followed to its source, struggling, straining . . . until, with an exultant WHOOMP she found herself propelled far beyond the tree.

She looked back down to see Fantabel bolt once more through the branches, then rush off into another plane. Sceädu cavorted in the mists. The tree-creature railed.

Tangina floated in a cirrhus conformation. "Carol Anne! I am here for you!"

"Mommy!" came the call. "Mommy, where are you?"

"Your mommy's not here, darling," Tangina projected. "But I'm here to help you. Don't be afraid."

"Where are you?" echoed Carol Anne's voice. "I want to go home."

"You will, child. Only do as I say."

Suddenly the ether crackled.

"Something's coming!" Carol Anne whimpered. "I think it's coming again!"

A high, quavery vibration expanded and contracted, like pulsing

fear.

Then a vile grunting came.

"Carol Anne! Do you see a light? Go toward the light! Go toward the light!"

"Mommy told me not to!" squealed the voice. Terror, indecision; violation of vows.

"Carol Anne! Go toward the light, but don't go into it! Your mommy just said not to go into it! Go toward the light, child. The Thing is afraid of the light! Stand near the light, Carol Anne, and the Thing won't come near you! Stay near the light, but don't look into it! Do you hear me, child?"

The smell of uncertainty clamored all around, like a great noise.

"Do you hear me, child!" Tangina screamed, trying to force her will on the frightened child.

The wind rose, buffeted Tangina's spirit; she did not resist. Explosions of light flooded her; neither did she resist this assault. Her deepest, embryonic horror rose up in physical manifestation, ripped her open, poised its fangs. Still, she tossed without opposition, rolled with total surrender. The fear alone was almost unbearable.

And then it stopped.

All was silent once again. The lightless void, the infinity out of time.

"Carol Anne," Tangina called weakly. She floated at her farthest reaches. It would be a long time before she got home.

"It went away," came Carol Anne's voice, quivering with relief. "I'm alone again."

"Are you near the light, child?"

"I'm near it, but I won't go in. I promise." She began to cry.

"Don't even look at it, Carol Anne. Don't worry, child. We'll have you home soon."

The little girl continued to cry. Tangina's strength was gone, though; she could do nothing more. Limply, she floated, letting the magnet of her body exert its warm attraction.

For a time, there was nothing. Then, for a while, a brilliant vortex took hold of her, spun her slowly at first, then faster and faster, into its center, spinning, screeching, approaching the speed of light, until at the last photon's-breadth away, it whipped her out again, into the ether.

Once, two presences fought over her—part of her was shredded in the process—but the two nonsubstances became entangled with each other, and Tangina floated free, while they reveled and tossed in their

own mutual agonies.

There were many ways into a place, and many ways out. Tangina knew she'd been touched by great evil as she'd guided Carol Anne to temporary safety; this evil clung to her, and made the ways out labyrinthine, cluttered with decay. But virtue had touched her, too, and not so long ago. She trusted the sureness of his hand to lead her back to the fleshly form that had so lately housed her soul.

For a long and delicate instant she floated, without intention, in the void.

Finally, she was aware of something calling her, something on another plane. Voices. A jumble of cries.

She felt a tingling, as of a sleeping limb regaining its circulation, the pins and needles of returning sensation. It was a characteristic feeling. It meant she was back in her body.

She opened her eyes. There was a hubbub of activity around her: nurses running all over, doctors calling out orders, medical students looking on in dismay or fascination. She closed her eyes again.

"She's alive!" someone yelled. "I just saw her open her eyes!"

"Get that I.V. started anyway!"

"Doyle, draw some bloods!"

"She's got a pulse again—thready, but it's there!"

"Somebody check her pupils."

Tangina felt somebody pull open her eyelids; then a bright light was shoved into her face. She knocked it away with her hand. "Get that light out of my eyes," she rasped. She was too tired for this nonsense.

"Hey, she's okay," somebody laughed.

"All right, everybody, show's over. Let's get her back in bed."

Tangina felt eight hands lift her off the floor, carry her unevenly for several steps, and set her down on a bed. She opened her eyes once more to see several people milling around now—one was drawing blood from her arm, one was starting an intravenous line, one was taping electrodes to her chest, taking an electrocardiogram.

Dr. Berman stepped into her field of vision. "You gave us quite a scare," he smiled reassuringly. "We came in on rounds, and for a second, there, it looked as if you weren't breathing."

Tangina wished he would go away. She was simply too exhausted to deal with this earnest young man's expectations and fears. Matters of greater moment depended on her full attention; she needed rest now, to prepare. Yet she knew this sentiment to be grossly unfair—in all likelihood, it was this earnest young man's expectations and fears that

had brought her back at all, had guided her, even seduced her back into her body, that she might regather her forces, to try once more to save the girl. Well. Later, she would thank him.

In any case, Dr. Berman kept talking, enunciating every syllable loudly and with exaggerated facial movement, as if Tangina were deaf or retarded. “Everything is fine, now, though. You just had a little temporary slowing of the heart—it’s not dangerous—now everything is back to normal.”

She closed her eyes again, courting bitter sleep—for nothing was back to normal, and danger panted at the door.

CHAPTER 7

Martha Lesh sat uncomfortably at the end of a large oval conference table, picking at her cuticles as people began to filter into the room and take chairs. The conference room was big, with two closed-circuit television sets suspended from the ceiling at one end, a modern green blackboard along the side wall, a 16-mm movie screen at the back. Thirty wooden chairs surrounded the table. By the time Martha began her presentation, most were filled.

It was a joint committee meeting, called by Dr. Lesh expressly to have her tapes seen and to be heard out. Members of the Human Research Committee, the Parapsychology Committee, the Psychiatry Department, and a smattering of medical students were present. Consequently, vis-a-vis parapsychology in general, this collection of professionals included believers, half-believers, nonbelievers, and antibelievers.

It was a formidable ensemble; Martha was uncertain of her approach. A few of them were already looking at their watches.

"I called you all here on this rather short notice because of data I've collected during the past two days which is . . . striking. So striking, I hardly know what to think, let alone how to proceed." She paused, looking for an encouraging glance from the assembled group; but there was none. She stood, and began to pace off her nervous energy as she continued speaking.

"Most of you are familiar with the basic form my research has been taking—hypnosis of paired subjects, suggestion of specific dreams to one, open-ended dreams to the other, then having blind independent judges try to match transcripts of one subject's dreams to the other subject—to look for any correspondence which might suggest telepathic, or otherwise paranormal transfer of information from one dreamer to the other. As some of you know, my results have been quite promising in a few instances, more equivocal in others. A number of weeks ago, I began working with Subject T, a self-proclaimed, though putatively reluctant, psychic. Approximately sixty-five hours ago, our investigations took a troubling turn.

"We'd been tracing the frequency of her ponto-geniculo-occipital electrical activity as it correlated with observed psychic phenomena, when suddenly—in the lab that night—her PGO area started discharging out of control—unlike anything any of us had ever seen.

Simultaneously, the Subject began speaking in the voice of a small child—apparently while she was dreaming. My colleague, Dr. Ryan Mitchell, noted, rather astutely, that the frequency of the brain wave in question varied according to the Subject's position—specifically, when she faced a certain direction, the electrical spikes observed were much more active. The analogy we'll refer back to, in this regard, will be to a receiving antenna which sustains maximal reception when aimed specifically at the source of transmission."

"Did I hear that correctly?" interrupted Dr. Hoffman, from the Medical School. "Are you suggesting this woman's *brain* was receiving messages that you were able to pick up on your EEG?" His voice was thick with derision.

"At the moment, I'm not suggesting anything. I'm merely presenting the data, as we gathered it, chronologically. When I am finished speaking—" she emphasized the last two words "—I will welcome any suggestions, postulations, or courses of action anyone can offer."

Hoffman nodded in token apology, like a naughty boy caught making faces at the teacher. Lesh continued.

"Because of requests made by the Subject, and because this turn of events was so novel and unanticipated, we modified the remainder of the experiment—turning it into its own, new, pilot study—in the following way.

"On the next night, we placed the Subject, myself, and two assistants in a mobile unit with EEG and telemetric capabilities, and began driving in whatever direction resulted in an increase of the type of electrical brain-wave activity in the Subject that I have just described—*as if* she were, in fact, a receiving unit we were using to home in on a transmitter."

Hoffman rolled his eyes to the ceiling. Lesh ignored him. "We arrived, in the morning, at the home of a suburban couple who appeared deeply troubled. They asked for our help. Subject T was in a state of exhaustion, so at this point I had my assistants bring her back here, to the hospital, while I remained with the family we'd contacted.

"During the interview which followed, they expressed to me the belief that their house had become inhabited by something like a poltergeist."

At this, Hoffman stood, smiled, looked pointedly at the clock on the wall. "If you'll excuse me, I have a one o'clock that I really mustn't be late for." He departed, followed by one of his junior faculty and two medical students.

Lesh waited until they were gone before continuing. "A poltergeist, for those of you unfamiliar with the term, is a 'noisy, or rattling spirit.'

Mr. and Mrs. F described to me episodes in which pictures had fallen from the walls, winds had blown in closed rooms, knocks had been heard, lights flashed, and so on. However, most disturbing to them, understandably, was the fact that their five-year-old daughter had disappeared. And more upsetting still was the fact that they could *hear* her—in the television set.

"Not physically inside, you understand—but her voice, and sometimes a hazy image would appear when the set was tuned to the static of an 'in-between' channel. The higher UHF channels seemed to work best, they told me.

"They were . . . distraught. I didn't know what to think—but since I'd gone this far, I decided to follow it to its conclusion, whatever that was. So we set up equipment that night—TV cameras, ion flux analyzers, magnometers, infrared lenses, and so on. The armamentarium of my discipline. What we saw, and finally recorded, has given me pause—as I said, I hardly know what to think.

"First, we examined the room in which the child was said to have disappeared—at least, we tried to examine it. Objects were moving inside it—flying about, actually—to such a great extent, we were unable to enter.

"Next, Mrs. F communicated with her daughter—Carol Anne—through the television in the living room. We all heard the girl's voice on the set—the same voice, incidentally, we'd heard Subject T speaking in the night before. The little girl said she saw a bright light; we advised her to stay away from it. More of this later.

"Next we witnessed a series of materializations . . ." Here Dr. Lesh opened her briefcase and began passing around some of the artifacts that had manifested. "These items literally appeared in mid-air before us, and fell to the floor." Some murmuring among the audience.

"Then there was this." She pulled several 8- x 10-inch blow-ups from her briefcase. "One of my assistants went upstairs at this point, to investigate the possibility of there being a covert transmitter in the house accounting for the voice we were hearing. While in the course of this investigation, the assistant had the acute and painful sensation of being bitten in the side . . ."

"Did you say 'bitten'?"

"Bitten in the side, while there was, in fact, no visible cause for such a bite. Nonetheless, on examining him a few moments later, we found evidence of these tooth impressions, which we took photographs of—which I will distribute now." Dr. Lesh passed around the photos of Marty's flank. "As you can see, they appear to be made by a mandible which is approximately twelve inches at its greatest width. We took

cultures of these tooth marks, as well, for both aerobic and anaerobic bacteria. As of this morning, nothing was growing on the aerobic plates. On the anaerobic media, two uncharacterizable forms grew briefly, developing small, unknown plaques, and then died within a few hours. Antigenic studies are now being undertaken. In addition, we gave the bite victim prophylactic tetanus toxoid immunization. We have, at this time, elected to withhold the antirabies vaccination series —even though I must say this bite appears to have been inflicted by a mammalian jaw of *some* kind—elected to withhold it at least temporarily, in the event that the animal can be found soon, and its rabies status evaluated."

People around the table looked over the pictures with various degrees of bafflement, disbelief, or nonchalance. Lesh moved on to the core of her presentation.

"We then saw—all of us saw . . . creatures appear . . . unearthly apparitions whose nature I can hardly describe . . . I hesitate even to mention them, since we were unable to obtain any documentary evidence of their existence. Nonetheless, I *do* mention them, because I did see them.

"There were three to appear first. As nearly as I can describe them, they resembled a flame, a shadow, and a tree. They interacted primarily with each other, in a fashion which I was incapable of understanding. My impression, though I am almost certainly anthropomorphizing, is that they were engaged in some sort of ritual dance. I have, quite honestly, very little conception of how long this episode lasted—I was, frankly, in a state of amazement.

"And finally, while this was taking place in the living room, we actually did get to videotape perhaps the most bizarre events of all this bizarre episode."

Lesh doused the room lights, took out the two videotapes, and plugged each into a cassette beneath its respective monitor. Someone at the end of the table mumbled, "Film at eleven."

Lesh ran the tapes.

When the tapes were finished, five more people left. There was a silence around the table. Finally, Dr. LeMay from the Psych Department spoke up, with a soft southern accent. "Martha, just what are you trying to say?"

Lesh sat down, took off her glasses. "I wish I knew," she smiled.

LeMay went on, "Now, I'm prepared to believe an awful lot, but this . . ." he gestured to the televisions . . . "is a bit beyond the pale, wouldn't you say?"

"Quite beyond, I would say," Martha nodded wearily.

"And wouldn't you think it's likely you've been hoaxed—probably by your Subject, in collusion with your Subject family? By magnets moving objects, and CB radio transmitters making voices on the tube, and holograms or mirror-projections accounting for what we just saw on your tapes? Don't you think the most likely, most parsimonious explanation of all this is that it's a wonderful, sophisticated magician's illusion?"

Lesh rubbed her eyes. "I would think so, if I hadn't been there."

LeMay smiled—not unkindly—and rose. "Now I *do* have an appointment. And I thank you for your demonstration." He, too, left, as well as a few more.

"Well," smiled Lesh, looking over the dwindling numbers. "This the hard core, then." There were a few appreciative chuckles. Someone turned the lights back on.

"We needn't postulate poltergeists," said Recht. "Perhaps the child is psychokinetic. She may be hiding, and producing these phenomena herself"

"I don't *believe* in psychokinesis," countered Schaffer, across the table.

"Well, I don't believe in *ghosts*," Recht answered irritably.

"What was that business about the 'light' the girl mentioned?" one of the grad students asked.

"I'm not sure," Dr. Lesh shrugged. "The way she spoke of it, it reminded me of the light that people talk about who have had out-of-body experiences—people who have been close to death, or who have even died briefly, by our measure—in which they describe leaving their bodies, and seeing a 'bright, waiting light,' about which they feel a sense of well-being, or curiosity, or 'blissful detachment.' It was on the basis of those first-person accounts that I urged the little girl—wherever she was—to stay away from the light. I was afraid, in some way, it might mean death for her."

"Aren't we getting a little far afield, here?" Dr. Wallace wondered. "I mean, going from hypnotic-state EEGs to psychokinesis to phantasms of the dead to out-of-body experiences . . . I mean—what are we *about*, here, today?"

"Well, I don't know about you, Wallace," said Recht, "but I'm about ready for lunch." He stood. "Thank you, Martha, it was fascinating. Please keep us posted." He left, in heated discussion with several others.

When they'd all filed out, Lesh sat facing the one who remained. Dr. Anthony Farrow, her eighty-year-old mentor, professor emeritus in the

Department of Psychiatry, smiled at her like a wizened sage.

"Quite an ordeal." He pursed his lips, shook his head.

"And what did *you* think?" Martha asked.

"In a word?"

"In a word."

"Too graphic." He jabbed his index finger on the table.

"It was the episode as it occurred," she insisted.

"Perhaps."

"Oh, Tony . . . you, too?" Her spirit wilted visibly, as her last friendly support seemed to falter.

"I so wish to accept what I saw," he protested. "I'm only steps away from the old wooden bridge myself, you know. To believe that something exists on the other side would be like a warm light in the window."

"Perhaps if tendrils of ectoplasm were all that showed up?"

"Better . . ." He nodded.

"A smoky shape lasting merely an instant." She drew her hand across her eyes, like a conjurer.

"Even better." He clapped.

"Nothing on tape at all . . . only sounds, rappings, a sigh . . ."

"They'd still be in here asking all sorts of questions now—and they'd want to go back with you to the house tonight. As it was, you gave them too much, Martha. Too much too soon." Dr. Farrow wrinkled his face at the television screen. "Nothing was left to the imagination. This isn't a science yet—it's still a sideshow, and your troubadours were not in their makeup."

"And these? What do you make of these?" She swept her hand over the dozens of pieces of jewelry on the conference table. Farrow picked up a beautiful brooch, and held it to the light.

"It's the real McCoy; that's one thing for certain. If they're charlatans, they're spending an awful lot of money on a silly trick." He pinned the brooch on Lesh's sweater, then picked up an antique ring and placed it on her finger. "Dear Martha. May we cross that bridge together some day? May all we believe be true. May we picnic in the clouds."

Martha laughed joyfully. "You old con artist. If only you were fifty years younger."

"Let me give you some advice." Dr. Farrow lowered his voice intimately. "Secret a few of those gems. Come out of this thing with

something in your pocket. *The National Inquisitor* pays more for scandal-mongering what we bust our rumps investigating—and for what?" He pounded the table with his fist.

"For what do they scandal-monger? Or for what do we investigate? I would say the money, and the glory, respectively—although we both tell ourselves it's for the Truth." Now it was Farrow's turn to laugh.

Lesh began folding the trinkets in a napkin, when one of them caught Farrows eye. He stopped her, reaching for it. "This is interesting." He picked up a thin, wiry clip—it looked like a dog muzzle for a miniature poodle. "Did this materialize with everything else?"

"Yes, I picked it up myself. Why?"

He turned it over, inspected it closely. "It's a staple—a clamp for the jaw."

"Not something you'd wear to the masquerade ball."

"No, but you would wear it to your own funeral. It's a mortician's trick. It prevents the mouth from suddenly dropping open when the body is in repose. It discourages a great deal of embarrassment, and . . . fainting."

"Well, it just about had the opposite effect when it showed up last night."

Farrow narrowed his gaze. "Where in the house did these pieces teleport?"

"In the living room—in living color. If only the cameras had been aimed . . ."

"So it was right where all your gadgets were stationed? TVs and cathode ray tubes, and all the other gizmos?"

"Yes. What are you getting at?"

"Oh, I don't know. It just brings me back to discussions we've had in the past, relating these phenomena to electromagnetic waves of various kinds. Here you tell me you tracked these people because Tangina was receiving waves of some kind—you should go see her, by the way; she had a bad spell this morning—then you tell me you could actually see and hear this vanishing child on an unused UHF channel. Then you tell me you found a bilocation point, the point where these things actually manifested, in a room that must have been dense with all kinds of electromagnetic radiation of varying frequencies. Who knows, maybe these things appeared right at the confluence of the emissions from the color TVs." Dr. Farrow smiled warmly at Martha. "Anyway, that's my parting shot."

They touched hands briefly. "Well," Martha said. She stood up.

"You're right, I must see Tangina—thank you for watching her for me. And then I must sleep for two hours, and then I absolutely promised the Freelings I would be back before dark. So." She kissed him on the cheek and arched her eyebrows in mock melodrama. "May the Force be with us."

"I hear you had a little incident this morning," Dr. Lesh said with some concern. "A vasovagal episode, the intern tells me—he said he thought you probably stood up too fast after having been in bed so many hours."

Tangina merely looked at Martha's eyes, without answering.

"Well?" Lesh pressed. "Is that what happened?"

"What do *you* think?" Tangina finally spoke. It was the same question Lesh had asked Farrow an hour earlier.

"I'm asking you," insisted Martha.

Tangina closed her eyes. A tear overflowed one corner. "Is there no antidote for my malady?"

"You were in contact again, then? With the child?"

"You can't understand; it's not your fault, you just can't. The pain of seeing things I wish I'd never seen—getting in strangle holds with other people's monsters. I don't choose my visions, you know—they choose me. And once I know a thing, I can never un-know it. It's like paradise lost for me—God, I envy you your blindness."

"The little girl—is she all right?"

Tangina sighed. "Yes. Yes. For the time being."

Lesh could see the strain on the woman's face. "It was . . . we had quite a night in Cuesta Verde, too," she said. "We saw the creatures of whom you spoke—in your dream. The shadow, the flame-man, the tree-thing."

Tangina twisted her head. "You saw them? Fantabel and Sceädu? Where?"

"In the living room of the house." Lesh shook her head, hardly believing her own memory. "They were . . ."

"Ah, how they have become bold," Tangina marveled, "to have come so audaciously into our plane—such impudence must have been incited. They are all touched by the heat of the Beast. I have no doubt."

"The Beast?" Lesh saw something move out of the corner of her eye. She turned her head quickly, but it was nothing.

"Twice, now," Tangina continued, "in my journeys to the dream

lands, I have encountered this great evil near the child. It is not the lord of this dimension, but it holds great sway, all the same. Great power. This morning I saw it—almost clearly. It was chasing the little girl. It manifested itself to me in different forms, so that in my weakened condition I would lose my way from fear. We escaped, this time, the child and I. But the Beast remains strong. He exerts great will over all the pitiable beings of that universe. He is a thing of horror."

Lesh remembered the phantom woman decending the stairs, holding court—remembered the way she'd begun to transform, become nearly transmogrified into something hideous. Something beastly.

"Twice, now, I've almost seen this thing," Tangina went on. "The third time, I will have him."

"What are you saying?" Lesh became concerned.

"I must try again." Tangina spoke on a falling note, hoarse with weariness and regret.

"Tangina, please." Lesh tried to be a friend. "You look simply awful. You have been sleep deprived to the limit by these trances, and I am as much to blame as you. Do you understand? You *must* get some rest."

"Do you understand? I can *get* no rest until this—situation—is resolved."

Lesh stared at Tangina sadly. "I'm going back tonight. I hope . . . if we can understand this thing . . . we can solve your dilemma as well as theirs."

"There is no understanding it." Tangina rocked her head from side to side. "It just *is*. I know that now. And there is no help for me."

"Nothing *just is*, but that it can be understood—if not *why* it is, then certainly *how*."

"That's all right, Dr. Lesh—you keep your faith in your *what*, and I'll keep my faith in mine."

Lesh's mouth twisted, almost bitterly. "And now you sound as skeptical and closed to my beliefs as the priests of my science were to you this afternoon."

"Ah. So your committee meeting went poorly. Dr. Farrow told me he was going—he predicted the outcome. He must he clairvoyant."

Lesh extended her hand, held Tangina's on the bed. "Please, try to get some rest tonight. We're doing what we can." She stood to leave.

Tangina raised her arm. "Wait," she whispered. "The Beast—it covets the child."

Lesh shivered involuntarily. She tried to smile, but could only manage a pulled sort of grimace. “I’m going to sleep now, myself. I’ll see you in the morning.” She walked out.

“The Beast,” Tangina muttered, “would work its will.”

Quietly, Tangina removed the I.V. from her arm, taped the puncture site, dressed, and slipped from her room. She walked down the hall, past the nurses’ station, to the doctors’ conference room. There she found Dr. Berman sitting, as she knew she would, talking to a medical student.

She addressed the student first. “Would you excuse us, please?” The flustered youngster left; Tangina closed the door behind him.

“Where the hell’s your I.V.?” demanded Berman as she sat down. “You shouldn’t even be out of bed. Let alone dressed.”

“Hello! And how are you?” she said brightly.

“Being nice is no excuse,” he scolded. “Now, what do you think you’re doing?”

“Just saying . . . hello,” she smiled.

“Meaning what?” He turned a jaundiced eye on her.

“Well, aren’t *you* suspicious.” Tangina tried to sound insulted, but failed. “Anyway, I just wanted to say thank you for . . . calling me back this morning.”

“Calling you back?”

“Yes. You know, sometimes, if no one is calling, it’s hard to come back.”

Dr. Berman scratched his head. “I have the feeling you’re talking about altered states again.”

“It’s hard to know, from time to time, exactly which is the altered state, and which the referent state.”

“Sounds like my sophomore year in college.”

She laughed with a shake of the head. “Well. You may joke. Still, there are times—critical moments in the migrations of a spirit through the void—when it can go either way. Back to now, or out to never. At those moments, landmarks are crucial—the memory of a touch, a familiar scent. In this trial of mine, you were my landfall. Your spirit cried out for me to come back, and to you I came. The candle that is you. For this, I thank you.”

Dr. Berman looked supremely embarrassed. “No one’s ever called me a candle before . . .” He started to try to make a joke out of it, but stopped.

Tangina walked over to his chair. He sitting, she standing, they were of a height. “Now,” she said, “I want you to kiss me.”

He sat back in acute bewilderment. No patient had ever said such a thing under similar, or any other, circumstances. He had absolutely no response ready. “I . . . I . . . uh . . .”

“Stop being ridiculous.” She almost took umbrage. “I don’t mean anything carnal. Just something . . . warm. Human.” She softened. “The breath of affection, to cup in my hands.”

He didn’t know what to say. “I have bad breath . . .”

She leaned forward. They both closed their eyes. Their lips met: touched, paused; paused, parted.

She stepped back. “Good-bye,” she said simply.

“You sound almost as if you were saying goodbye,” he replied.

She turned and left.

In the corridor she ran into Louise Dreyer, the volunteer.

“Louise, I’m so glad you’re here. I was just going to go look for you.”

“Miss Barrons . . .”

“Please come with me.” Tangina led the woman down to her room, sat her in a chair. “Now. I haven’t much time or energy to give you, but I didn’t really want to put you off to this morning . . . and I don’t know if I’ll be back this way again. So please . . .”

“Oh, no, no . . .”

“Yes. Please. Tell me what you need, and perhaps I can help you, even just a little, right now.”

Louise screwed up her resolve, took a deep breath. “All right. It’s my brother, Andrew. He vanished five years ago, and I just know he’s alive, and if you could just let me give you something of his to feel, and take a reading, and tell me even just what area of the country he’s living in, just any lead that would help us locate him, I’d be so grateful, I could give you whatever we . . .”

Tangina stopped her with a raised hand. “Sshh.” She placed her palm on Louise’s head, closed her own eyes, went into a light trance. Louise remained absolutely silent.

Tangina opened her eyes again a minute later. “I’m sorry,” she said.

“Sorry?”

“I’m sorry, I can’t get any feeling for him—I don’t know where he might be.”

“Oh . . .”

“But leave your address for me at the front desk, Louise. And if I ever run across Andrew, or news of him, during my . . . travels . . . I’ll be certain to try to reach you.”

“Oh, thank you, thank you, Miss Barrons.” Louise was profuse. “Yes, I’ll leave all the information you need.” She almost ran from the room.

Tangina sighed. Andrew was dead, that much was clear. Louise knew it, too, whether consciously or not. Tangina hadn’t received any vivid picture of the circumstances of that knowledge, but she didn’t want a clearer picture. She wished Louise well. She breathed deeply a few times. She hoped she didn’t run into Andrew.

She walked out into the hall again, up the first stairwell she found, up to the fifth floor. Five North. She walked to the nursing station.

“Is Julie here?”

One of the nurses looked up. “Down the hall, passing meds.”

Tangina walked halfway down the hall, and stopped. Julie stood at the medication cart with her back to the psychic, counting pills into paper cups. Willow-thin, blond, a little stooped. Tangina studied her aura.

At last, she walked up to the young woman. “Excuse me . . .”

Julie turned. “Yes? Oh. Yes?” She was a bit surprised.

“Excuse me, I’m rarely this forward, but I’m about to go on an extended trip . . . and I thought I’d like to say . . .”

“Yes?” The young nurse looked intensely curious.

“You . . . have a lovely aura. I . . . that’s all. God bless you, dear.”

Tangina turned and exited quickly by the far stairs, leaving a bemused Julie recounting her pills.

So much for final farewells. Time now for the final grim event. She descended six floors to the basement. She didn’t exactly know the hospital layout, she wasn’t sure just where she was, but she knew she was in the basement, and this was where most hospitals kept the place she was seeking. The morgue.

For it wasn’t the child she was after anymore; now, it was the Beast she must lure.

She walked up one hall and down the next, some dark, some lit with sickly fluorescence. She passed labs, locker rooms, lecture halls, slide libraries. Finally she came to a door marked PATHOLOGY: NO UNAUTHORIZED ADMITTANCE. She knew what that meant. Gently, she cracked the door and went in.

The room she found herself in was the pathology museum. Shelf upon shelf lined the walls, floor to ceiling. Each shelf was filled with

bottles, each bottle filled with liquid; in each bottle, something floated: a cancerous hand, a head sliced in planes like a loaf of bread, a mutant embryo, a diseased kidney. A museum of human pathology. Tangina flared her nostrils—if she couldn't find a place to hide in the morgue, this place would do nicely. Empty, dark, quiet, deathly; a proper place for her task.

She ambled across the floor to another door, this one frosted white glass, upon which were stenciled the letters POST-MORTEM. Beyond the glass were bright lights, and the sound of clackering instruments.

She approached the door, pushed it open an inch, and peeked in. Four men in white coats stood around a single corpse lying pale upon a steel table. They joked, spoke of football and sex. Two of them ate sandwiches. A third took a scalpel and began to flay open the belly of the cadaver.

Tangina let the door ease shut. A good place, in there, but too crowded. It would have to be in here, her seance. She would have to call the Beast to her here.

She looked all around until she found just the right spot—a niche formed by a semicircle of bottles piled in one corner: a brain, with eyes attached; a malformed fetus; a gouty foot; a heart, showing entrance and exit wounds; a face eaten by tumor. The catalogue was endless. Tangina curled up in the niche. She stared deeply into a spot of light reflected in the curved glass of one of the beakers. Her breathing grew quick and shallow. Her eyes began to glaze.

"Come to me, Beast," was the last thing she consciously remembered thinking. "We have much to discuss, you and I."

She dissociated. The phantoms of the morgue and museum surrounded her—decapitated spirit-forms, ghastly and gray; scabrous, emaciated, tormented, unwhole.

"Beast, come." Tangina communicated through the ether. "See what I am made of."

A demon tried to lock onto her from out of nowhere—a test, perhaps—or perhaps it sought her vitality. It made a clackering noise, and it hurt, but Tangina had known worse demons and let it pass through her.

"See, Beast," she called, "I have no fear to die. Other things I fear, but not to quit this sleepless life of mine; nor do I fear you. I know you, Beast."

Tangina rose higher, into black space, above the other spaces. She couldn't soar here, though—this domain was viscous. A diminishing place. It was akin to a plane she'd passed through before—she knew she could cross from here to the sphere of shadows, and from there to

the Beast's domain. But she didn't want to go there now. She wanted the Beast to come to her.

She didn't think drawing him here would be too difficult. This was the type of spirit-world he rejoiced in. A phantom without a face rose beside her. A hand—twitching, crushed and severed at the wrist—grabbed at her neck, but she batted it away easily. Rotting entrails flowed behind her, caught her foot, began to enwrap her. She pulled them away, but they left a film upon her, a foul and mucoid odor.

"Beast!" she called out. "Come!"

But he did not come.

She flowed in paceless turnings, trying to approach his lair tangentially, to catch him unaware. This way took her through a universe of yellow webs—a sticky, clinging lattice that enclosed her quickly in a smothering cocoon. She chewed her way out—chewed an air hole, at least—and freed her fingers enough to pull herself thread by thread across the yellow matrix.

Eventually, the lattice turned into a foam of sorts, more slick than sticky, and then into a froth, or lather, in which Tangina foundered, gasping, under a moaning storm. Raging ages passed. At last, the storm abated; Tangina rose above the foam into a clear and icy calm.

She took her bearings. Far ahead, a ruby sun revolved around its indigo twin. Liquid fire gushed between the two at their closest point; amethyst ice crystals cracked and tinkled as they drew apart. Rainbow spirits lived in the diffraction patterns, spiraling in orbits of intricate design. Creatures of light, Tangina trusted them. She called to them her plight; they answered in color-song; they gave her direction.

She moved beyond the sibling stars, into an empyrean of concentric, gaseous rings. Careful not to touch any ring, she tunneled through the core, exiting into a shimmering atmosphere, spotty with mists. It was here, for the first time, she saw the woman.

A stately spirit-woman, moving on the mists. Her gown was regal, fin-de-siècle; her manner, graceful. There was a pale beauty about her face; yet her eyes were the deepest hollows, plummeting to the abyss of another dimension. She had an air of waiting about her.

Surrounding the spirit-woman were twenty souls, who somehow seemed to be looking out for her—on guard, even. Beyond them, a thousand souls milled aimlessly in the vapors, weeping, laughing, lost, wandering. Carol Anne was among them.

The spirit-woman moved in their midst, encircled by her entourage. It was unclear how, but in some way she was the mistress of this astral level. She neither ruled nor guided these wandering spirits, yet was somehow their essence. She was good, withal, but goodness was not

her quintessential aspect. Her quintessential aspect was attendance.

The spirit-woman waited. She wasn't lost, like others here, nor did she tarry in hopes of tempering her state by the timely arrival of that which she awaited. The lingering itself was her object and her element. It made her neither happy nor sad. The waiting was what she was. She abided.

Tangina glided over the haphazard procession, looking for a sign. She saw Carol Anne at one point, rambling through the multitude, but left the girl to straggle, temporarily safe in her anonymity. It was the vile thing Tangina wanted now.

There. In the mists, she dimly perceived him.

She opened herself to sense—so exposed, she was dangerous and endangered. "Beast, I see you," she glowered. The Beast was in the earthly plane, bending over a woman who slept in a yellow dress—groping, probing, drooling in demented foreknowledge. Suddenly it looked up from its unconscious feast, alarmed by Tangina's presence.

"I see you, Beast," she called again. "Come to this one who knows you."

The Beast screeched in fury at the intrusion. It hobbled crabwise up and down the bed, back and forth, walking across the sleeper's back, dragging its ragged claws, grimacing, salivating. It sat on her back, rolled her over, sat on her chest. It screeched again.

"I am here, Beast," announced Tangina.

With a vacant hiss, it took one final look at the sleeping figure of Diane, put away its lust for another time, and loped off. Into the void.

In the void, they circled—Tangina and the Beast. Neither could see, here; neither could hide. All was sense, here, and counter-sense. They circled, coalesced, evaporated.

"Come, show me your fangs," Tangina laughed. "Do your worst. Say your name."

Before she finished, he attacked—sank his saber teeth into her neck with an anger beyond all reason. Almost tore her head off. Tangina dissolved, though, into a vaporous presence; wisps of her smoke circled around him. A bit of her even wafted up his nostrils—he shrieked at her smell.

In the moment before he violently exhaled her steamy substance, she crept up his nasal passages. A few motes of her reached his phthisic lungs; a few even needled his turbinates, went into his brain, before he could expel her.

With a great snarling cough he was rid of her, but too late. She'd won the first round. A piece of her knew him now, intimately, from

within. He'd never been so violated. It made him wary, and enraged.

They hovered, facing again. Tangina felt powerful after her first strike; but also loathing almost beyond endurance at what she'd been able to sense in the Beast's heart, and in his brain. It was vital knowledge for her to have, but at what cost!

It gave her a temporary advantage, she knew, to have pierced his essence so quickly—he might falter, if she pressed. But care! He was still deadly, and how foul, she had barely touched.

"So, Beast," she gloated. "Now *I* can say your name. gHalâ, gHalâ. A paltry name, not even so base. It surprises me not, that you would not say it. It must be an embarrassment to you. gHalâ." She said it as if she were clearing her throat. "gHalâ. Thou thing without mother."

The Beast howled and lunged. Tangina stepped aside, like a matador, did not engage him. He tumbled, whirled, drooled putrid matter. He paused, panted; assessed this meager adversary. "Khhhhh," he hissed softly.

"So, gHalâ, you come to kiss me and stumble like a fool. Begone from this plane; you shame yourself."

He turned into an acid jelly, squirted hard upon her face; she changed to glass, and the caustic gel oozed down her surface. He became a craggy boulder, tried to shatter her; she shifted shape to water, let him pass, and wet his skin. He heated up to burn her—sizzling, she evaporated. He supercooled the ether, caught the ice crystals as they condensed, crushed them in his fist—she transmuted into tiny spikes that slashed his palm. He roared. The lacerations spewed her with his odious blood, covered her with the oily black substance, like fluid depravity—it burned her, made her gag, the fumes reeked so of malignancy.

They both returned to form, jumping back, winded, hurting. Again they circled.

He feinted an assault with diamond-fire; she parried; he deceived the parry; she vaporized before the lance could touch her.

She reconstituted in a locus behind the place the Beast had been—but he was waiting for her now; he faced the condensation of her spirit, well within his grasp. Before she could effect another transsubstantiation, he stabbed his talons full into her eyes.

She wailed, fell back. He followed, tore her middle open, blew his fetid spit into the wound. Dizzy with pain and disgust, she dematerialized. Still, he was relentless. Before her smoky form could diffuse into the void, he inhaled mightily, sucking her entirety inside his lungs. He held his breath. He trapped her there.

Thinly, he grimaced. He could hold his breath for a long time—time enough to suffocate this scum, absorb her pasty weakly spirit, then puff it out and smudge it, lifeless, on some hungry shadow.

Tangina hammered at the sepulchral darkness, but to no avail. It sapped her breath, her hope, to be thus bound within the tomb of this monster's chest. Rapidly, her spirit drained; her core began to shrivel.

No. This could not be. Forcing all distraction aside, she dissociated into microcosmic particles, smaller even than the pores of the seal in which gHalâ's lungs had encased her. He sensed the threat, and tightened the seal further still, tighter than the smallest electron—but not before two infinitesimal atoms of Tangina had trickled across the barely permeable membrane that separated lung from blood . . . and plunged into the Beast's bloodstream.

Through the malodorous stuff Tangina's points of being coursed, through the heart, and out to the brain. They lodged themselves about a tender piece of brain tissue, and, forcibly, began to squeeze.

The beast became aware of the throbbing in his head. He knew its cause. He must not falter. It was only pain, it would not kill him; it would stop if he could but hold his breath long enough to suffocate the spirit he'd imprisoned. He must concentrate. He must hold his breath against all pain. His densely vacant eye sockets grew deeper. The throbbing in his head increased.

Tangina felt herself getting vertiginous with air-hunger. She lowered all her senses, all her energy demands, to the minutest fraction above death—all except the two beads of her essence squeezing gHalâ's brain. In these two points she exercised all her will, her last undying strength, squeezing, squeezing.

The pain was growing too intense. He couldn't stand it. His head was exploding; he wished it would explode. His brain was twisting, pulsing, being squeezed beyond all comprehension—it was impossible to bear, his breath was holding, holding.

In the final moments of her final consciousness, Tangina gathered what few filmy shreds of concentration she had remaining to the last two moments of her self, yet compressing fiercely on the creature's bursting brain . . .

"Well, what did he say?" asked Diane. "What are they gonna do?" She was referring to the other scientists at the university—Lesh's colleagues. Diane had been feeling unsettled since rising from her afternoon nap, as if she'd had a discomfiting nightmare that wouldn't quite leave her, but she couldn't remember what it was. So she eagerly awaited Lesh's news—news of reinforcements, weapons, hope.

“They were . . . stymied,” Martha answered, as evenly as she could. It broke her heart to see Diane’s face fall like that, so she hurried to amend her statement. “They want to keep close tabs on developments here, though—they insisted I stay here and continue our investigations.”

Ryan silently shook his head, kept on puttering with the wires behind his amplifier: he knew what *that* meant.

But Diane was no fool; she knew, too. Her chin quivered, yet she would not cry. Steve put his arm around her shoulder.

“We’re going to go through it all again tonight, aren’t we?” said Steve. “There’s nothing we can do. Is there?” It was full night, now. Past ten o’clock. The television sets were all on. The electronic instruments were all set up. The Freelings were all going mad.

Mischievous poltergeist activities had continued unabated all day—breaking dishes, strange knocks, a few teleportations. Nothing serious. For the past hour, though, a sticky odor had descended upon them that seemed to cling—they all picked at their clothes in useless carphology, as if trying to pull away the webs of death. Then, just as suddenly, the cloying sensation was gone.

The sound of laughter came next—unkind, unmeaning. Laughter like sandpaper. A morbid intuition settled over the house. It made Martha feel physically nauseated. Ryan began to hyperventilate at one point, but Dr. Lesh talked him down, reminded him of his function.

Around ten-thirty, they turned out all the house lights—they’d found darkness facilitated communication with Carol Anne. When all was ready, they took their positions. Diane stood in the center of the room, and called out.

“Carol Anne. We’re here, baby. Can you hear us?”

Silence. Diane tried for five more minutes, then sighed. Her chin quivered slightly, and she sat down on the floor. Everyone rested quietly for a while. Listening.

Ryan noticed it first. Shadows in the hallway seemed to be moving. He jumped when the movement struck him initially, out of the corner of his eye. Training his vision directly at the hall, he saw nothing out of the ordinary for many seconds . . . and then it happened: a large, amorphous shape expanded slowly, changed inclination, resettled.

Ryan leaped to his feet, hit the hall light in two long strides. Nothing there. In the bright glare of the hundred-watt bulb, the foyer was clean and empty. Not even a piece of furniture.

“What is it, Ryan?” Dr. Lesh lifted her head.

“Nothing, I . . . thought I saw something. Just getting jumpy, I

guess."

They all smiled weakly. He killed the light and sat down again.

Five minutes later, there the motion was again. More, this time. Shadows, moving over each other, expanding, contracting, nestling, watching.

"Dr. Lesh?" whispered Ryan.

"Yes?"

"Do you see . . . something in there?" He tilted his head toward the hall.

Before she could respond, there was a sound in the television. They all crowded around it.

"Carol Anne?" breathed Diane.

Shadows moved vaguely in the static snow of the screen, forming, dissolving, reforming.

"Carol Anne, can you hear? It's Mommy, sweetheart."

"Are you there?" came a voice from the television. "Are you there?"

It wasn't Carol Anne's voice.

The shock of this realization stunned them all, but Diane more than any. She reeled back from the set with a tiny cry.

"Are you there?" the voice repeated, ethereal, distant. The image resolved more: it resembled the ghost-woman who'd descended the stairs the night before.

"Yes," Lesh spoke loudly. "We are here for you. Who are you?"

There was a pause, as if the speaker were considering the question. "I am she . . . who waits."

Lesh felt a thrill to the red of her bones. "What are you waiting for?"

Static washed the shadow out completely; then the woman returned. "I look for . . . him. He will return for me. I know he will."

"My baby," Diane urged the television. "Is my baby in there with you?"

The vision faded. Lesh addressed it loudly. "There is a child in there. With you. She's five years old; her name is Carol Anne. Do you know her?"

The moving dots took form again. "I am the mistress of all my people. I wait for them all. I speak to their biding. I am the mother of their longing; they are the children of my patience."

"No," whimpered Diane. "No, God, no . . ."

"We want her back!" shouted Steve. He'd given all his effort to

remain in a semblance of control for so long, to being the model of silent strength, that now the thin superstructure holding him erect was starting to crack. He spoke again, his voice quavering. “She belongs here with us, not with you. She doesn’t want to wait.”

The image in the picture tube seemed almost to smile, almost to sleep. “I am she who waits.”

Lesh moved closer to the set. “There is . . . there is an evil thing there with you. Are you safe? Can it hurt you? What is it?”

“My people soothe my longing pangs,” the voice returned inscrutably. “We shall not want, for want we shall.”

“What . . .” Lesh had so many questions, she couldn’t sort them out, didn’t know which to ask first. “What do your people want? What is it they’re looking for there?”

The spirit-woman’s voice faded in the static, as a car ignition kicked over down the block. The words were lost. Reception cleared in the middle of her sentence, then dissolved again. “. . . their mementos. They must be returned. They are the memoirs of . . . there must be . . . of remembrance . . .”

“We can’t hear you!” Lesh pleaded. “Don’t go! What were you speaking of?”

The image grew darker. “The jewelry. You can use it . . . as . . . uses me. But you must return it. We will wait.”

Lesh hesitated. “As—what uses you?” She felt a chill creep down her neck.

The resolution seemed to intensify. “FhÿrgHalâghûl, when he will. I don’t mind. I only wait for my beloved.” The face turned aside; tears could almost be imagined on the deathly white cheek, but the static was too coarse to permit such distinctions. The ghost of an image paused, then went on. “FhÿrgHalâghûl leaves the others alone if he . . . can take my spirit . . . from time to time. But I only wait. It matters not to me.”

“But what about Carol Anne?” Diane whispered. “What about my baby?”

“I only wait . . . I remain . . . he will return for me . . . I know he will . . .” Her voice faded, with her shape, into snow.

Diane buried her face in Steven’s chest, crying. Lesh sat back and looked at the sack full of jewelry. “Give it back? How do we give it back?”

Ryan checked the recorders to make sure everything had been picked up. As he was fiddling with the reset buttons, he noticed something zip across his peripheral visual fields again. He looked up

into the darkened hallway once more, remembering suddenly he'd left them full of shadows. There were no vague shapes now, only solid darkness. Impenetrable. He shook his head, went back to his machines. Again, peripheral movement. Again, only blackness when he tried to delve into its subtleties.

Wait. There was movement now. A darkening at the far wall, opposite the staircase. Once and for all, Ryan stood with a determined grip on himself, and stalked into the hall. He turned on the light switch. The light didn't go on.

Ryan was only standing six or eight feet from the sinister corner, now, though. He stared at it intensely. Before his eyes, across the entire face of the wall: two great, black holes appeared mid-way up, between them the skeletal depression of a nasal cavity. A bony brow started to protrude near the ceiling; the length of the floor glistened moist black with salivary juices: a face was coming through the wall. The face of horror they'd witnessed on the television the night before. The face of the Beast.

The wall began to change its contours markedly—Ryan opened his mouth to yell, when suddenly a voice came over the television again, loud and insistent: "Mommy! Mommy!"

The face in the wall instantly receded. Wall again only. Ryan ran back into the living room.

"Here I am, baby," Diane called. "We won't leave you. Mommy and Daddy love you."

Martha motioned to Ryan to start the tapes up, which he did. He refocused one of the cameras on the monitor, and began adjusting various dials.

It was then that they heard the other noise. The noise outside.

"What was that?" Ryan stopped what he was doing. His whisper was almost a shriek.

"It sounded like a . . . rattling. In the back." Lesh said that for the tape recorder—no one in the room needed to be told what it sounded like.

Nobody moved. It came again. Whrwhrwhr.

Lesh took a deep breath. "I'll go look. Ryan, you stay here with the instruments."

"I'll go with you," said Steve.

"No," Lesh responded with great regret. "You stay with your wife and child. I have a feeling they may need you."

She took the heavy-duty flashlight, walked through the hall to the kitchen, and out the back door.

The backyard was black under a cloudy sky. Wind rustled in the bougainvillea along the side of the house, and somewhere a rodent skittered for cover. Could that have been the sound they had heard? No. Whrwhrwhr. There it was again.

Lesh followed her ears and the beam of her flashlight around the corner of the house and out. Fifteen steps, twenty. She stopped at a huge, cubical pit carved out of the earth, undoubtedly the future swimming pool. She shined her light down into it: thick brown mud, the color and consistency of coagulating . . .

Something grabbed her; she swiveled on one foot, swinging her weighted light, ready to scream, not ready to die—and the arc of the flashlight passed inches over Tangina's head.

With her stomach in her throat, Lesh sat down hard on the cold ground. It was a few moments more before she found her breath. "Tangina," she gasped.

"I didn't mean to frighten you, Doctor," whispered the psychic. They were at eye level now, Tangina on her feet, Martha on her behind. "I have a strong sense about this pool, though. I was just doing a little excavating of my own to explore it. I tell you, quite frankly: this place is a wealth of senses to the sensitive."

"But . . . but . . . how did you get here?" Lesh finally managed to blurt out.

"In a taxi, what else? I don't drive, myself, you know, and there certainly aren't any buses at this time of . . ."

"But how did you know where . . ."

"Cuesta Verde, you said. The Freelings of Cuesta Verde. I hardly needed to be psychic to locate . . ."

"But this is impossible. You must leave." Lesh was getting a hold on herself once more, remembering her role here. "You're in no condition to . . ."

"I'm in no condition not to, Doctor. I'm needed here; that is quite apparent. Moreover, if putting an end to this thing is the only way I can get any rest, I think you would do well to help me end it."

Lesh looked at Tangina in the dark of the dreadful night. The small woman appeared actually quite powerful—her hair neat, her clothes pressed, she looked to Lesh suddenly like a mystical, potent, suburban warrior. In spite of the mirthless circumstances, Dr. Lesh laughed.

"And what shall we do?"

Tangina smiled craftily—this was, after all was said and done, her craft. "First you shall take me inside. I must meet the inhabitants. I must sense the house. Already I am overpowered by the dualities—

great good and great evil abide herein."

"Good. Evil. These terms are relative to a scientist. They have little to do with physical reality—with the *phenomena* of the universe. Still, I have reached my limit. I will do as you ask."

"We are entering the sphere of the soul, now; Doctor; here good and evil have strong realities. Here there are no scientists."

"Ah, but to a scientist, Tangina, there will always be electromagnetic waves."

"Your invisible waves are but the turbulent surface on a vast ocean, Doctor—an ocean of greater depth and darkness than either of us can hope to penetrate. We can only hope to float."

Lesh smiled resignedly, then noticed something in Tangina's face. She held her light up to it. "What happened to your eyes?" she whispered. Tangina's eyes were red, puffy, bruised.

"Tonight I met the Beast." She squinted. "I will spare you knowledge of his name. We did battle, this ancient one and I, and we both of us have felt the other's mark." She grinned slyly. "Neither won for good and all. But he'll think twice before crossing my path again. We were locked in a clutch of death—and I'm not certain he couldn't have won. But at the moment we were both in *extremis*, the Lady of that plane passed across our field of battle, with her coterie, and bustled all around him, jostling us thoroughly out of his concentration and mine. I let go, and he wheezed me clear away. She saved my life and soul, the spirit-woman, though if she knew it I cannot tell."

Lesh rubbed her temples, trying to comprehend the crossing purposes. "It was She Who Waits."

Tangina looked jolted a second, then softened her expression to one of gentle admiration. "You surprise me at times, Lesh; I am impressed. Yes, it was the Woman of Waiting—though more I cannot see."

Lesh smiled. "It's been a waking nightmare, from start to—and, still not finished. I think we need a Jungian analyst to interpret the meaning of these visions." She checked her glasses. "And televisions."

"You don't need a Jungian analyst, my dear. You need me. And by God, you have me." Tangina put her hand on Martha's shoulder. "So come on, then. Let's get this poor child back to her parents. One thing I can tell you—that Beast won't be so quick to want to see *me* again." She winked; then shrugged, adding, "Nor I, him."

Dr. Lesh stood, with Tangina's help. The night was getting colder. They walked side by side toward the house.

"One other thing, before we go in." Tangina paused on the patio. "The Beast—it's sniffing after the woman now."

CHAPTER 8

"Steve, Diane—this is Tangina Barrons. You saw each other briefly the other morning, actually, but neither of you were in any condition for introductions, as I recall."

They all shook hands and said hello. The house had grown unsettlingly still since Lesh had gone out into the yard to investigate the noise. Now that she was back, the internal wind was gone, the television voice had disappeared, the oppressive atmosphere was no more.

"I'm sorry to drop in on you so unexpectedly," Tangina said brightly. "But don't worry, I've eaten."

The attempt at levity failed miserably, and put a further strain on everyone's jangled nerves. Tangina was instantly aware of the pall she'd created, and softened her tone. "I'm sorry. I was only trying to put you at ease, and now I've put you off. Please—I'm here to help you."

"Steve . . . Diane . . . truly, Tangina can help. Do not resist her. Her arrival tonight is unorthodox, but I assure you—to me, at least—welcome. Trust her as you would me." Lesh hoped Tangina would earn that trust more than she herself had.

"We'll do anything at this point," Diane murmured, with a thin smile. She shifted her shoulders uncomfortably: painful scratches had appeared across her back sometime during the afternoon, for no apparent reason. She felt on the verge of crying.

"Why don't we go into the living room?" suggested Tangina. "You can tell me everything there."

They shuffled into the front room in a pack, and sat down amidst the rubble of instruments and broken furniture. In a monotone of masked emotion, Steve elaborated the series of events that had befallen them. Tangina listened quietly, without interrupting. In the background, the television hissed.

When he'd finished the story, Tangina sat for a moment, then stood rubbing her hands together. "I'd like to examine the house," she said earnestly. She'd resisted this moment, resisted with all her heart this final confrontation—it carried with it so much pain and horror, this disease of which she'd been striving so hard for cure, this malignant empathy from which she suffered, this fulminant para-psychotic

sensitivity to the spirits of the living and the dead—resisted this final hour so passionately . . . and yet, now that she was here, she was completely here. In the thick of what it had been given her to do. Like a mercenary soldier, she knew her trade well—and when it wasn't torturing her soul, she reveled in it.

"Of course," said Steve. He got up, and, a second later, so did Diane.

Tangina raised her hand. "Alone, if I may."

The Freelings sat down uncertainly. Tangina walked off into the reaches of the house.

Lesh spoke kindly to Diane. "Believe me, she's a benevolent soul. It was she who led us here in the first place."

"She and the oscilloscope," added Ryan. With Marty gone, he'd begun to assume a proprietary relationship to the apparatus conglomeration in the room.

Lesh smiled. "Yes. The marriage of technology and spirit. There lies a lesson for us, but I don't know where."

Tangina quickly dispatched the downstairs rooms—kitchen, dining room, living room, den, hallway, utility room, porch. There were, it was true, some areas of interest—the corridor and the back of the kitchen, specifically—but they were minor concerns, concentrations of gloom, as opposed to essential gall. Without wasting time here, she climbed the deepening stairs.

Dana's room, similarly, was unremarkable. Next, Tangina walked down the long dark hallway to the master bedroom. The place fairly reeked.

On the wall above the head of the bed, visible to Tangina's second sight, was a stain—an oozing, living mark, its purulent core radiating spokes in every direction. A tarantula stain. It made Tangina gag.

The bed itself was bad, too. A muddy color suffused it, and a muddy smell. Something dead and long-undiscovered had lain here recently, as she well knew; lain here and left its fetid secretions. Tangina knew enough of this room.

She exited deliberately, tried the next room down the hall. The door was closed and locked.

She called down the stairs: "Why is this door locked, Mr. Freeling?"

Steve looked up the stairs. He began to answer, then had another idea. Steadily, he closed his eyes and concentrated.

"Answer her," Diane whispered.

"I am," he whispered back. He continued focusing inward.

After a moment, Tangina appeared at the top of the stairs. “I am addressing the living?” she called down again, patiently.

Steve relaxed, opened his eyes. “Sorry,” he called back. “That’s the room my son and daughter occupy.”

“We believe it’s the heart of the house,” added Dr. Lesh.

“This house has many hearts,” said Tangina, turning back into darkness.

Steve approached Dr. Lesh and spoke softly. “I was trying to answer with my mind, but she couldn’t hear me. I thought you said she was an extraordinary clairvoyant.”

From far upstairs, they heard Tangina roar out: “You must not doubt me! That is essential!”

They regarded each other sheepishly. A minute later, the extraordinary clairvoyant shouted down again. “Dr. Lesh, will you accompany me up here, please?”

The doctor excused herself and headed upstairs. Steve and Diane huddled in front of the television, while Ryan sat checking periodic readouts.

Lesh and Tangina stood outside the children’s bedroom. The door was open now. Inside, the room was dark and still.

“This is the room,” said Tangina.

Lesh nodded. “It’s quiet, now.”

“The Beast is a little wary of me.” Tangina winked. “Not a great deal, to be sure, but as I say, I have given him pause.”

Lesh raised her eyebrows. “Can you describe it more for me?”

“Ah yes, we became quite conversant before we actually locked horns.”

“And what is its nature?”

“It is protean, this Beast. Once, I think, it was human—now, it loves its twisted existence. It would neither come back nor go on, if it could. It is obsessed with its wicked self. I have seen it before, in other forms. And now I have seen it again.”

“How did you come to confront it? What did it say?” Lesh was intrigued, fascinated. This was out of her realm, but, after all she’d seen, she no longer felt qualified to glimpse the truth. She was purely an observer, now.

“It wouldn’t come to me.” Tangina nodded Cannily. “It has become too self-satisfied. It guards its lost spirits like a miser in a cave. It tries to grasp too much, though—that will be its downfall. It won’t release that which it hoards, even to save itself. We took each other’s measure

—and I tell you, he is formidable.” Her eye creases wrinkled. “But so am I.”

“And how do we proceed with this Beast?”

“We shall see. There are several possible approaches. It depends on these people.” She gestured downstairs.

“They are strong.”

Tangina nodded noncommittally. “Then we shall see.”

Together, they walked downstairs. Tangina pulled Diane to her knees from where she’d been slumped against a chair.

“Give me your hand, child.”

Diane hesitated, looked to Dr. Lesh.

“Come on, I won’t bite,” the psychic went on. Diane was at eye level with her. She put her hands in Tangina’s.

Softly, so that only Diane could hear, Tangina said, “Your daughter is alive in this house.”

Diane sobbed, kept on sobbing: the grievous joy of having her dire hopes confirmed by another. Tangina hugged her, patted the back of her head. Steve started toward them, but Tangina motioned him away. “. . . a glass of water,” she whispered. He disappeared into the kitchen.

“Where have the materializations been taking place?” Tangina asked Lesh. “The bilocation episodes.”

Lesh pointed to the air a few feet from Tangina’s head.

Tangina nodded. “I have my strongest feeling the point of origin is inside the child’s closet. Upstairs.”

Diane bobbed her head up and down. “Yes. I feel that, too.”

“Now, child,” said the clairvoyant, holding Diane at arm’s length. “Are you going to be strong for me? For your daughter? I can do absolutely nothing without your faith in this world and your love for the children.”

“I will. Believe me, I will.”

“Will you do anything I say? Even if it comes contrary to your beliefs, to all you believe?”

“Yes. Oh yes. Please.”

Tangina waited a moment, considering. She spoke first just to Diane, then to the group. “Carol Anne is not like . . . them. She’s a living presence in their spiritual but earth-bound plane. They’re attracted to the one part of her that is different from themselves: her life force. It is very strong. It gives off its own illumination. It’s a light that implies life—the memory of love, and home, and earthly

pleasures—things they desperately desire, but can't have anymore."

"The Lady of Waiting," murmured Lesh. "The mother of their longing. The spirit-woman."

Tangina nodded. "Almost I could believe that woman is a distillation of all their unfulfilled yearnings. Right now, though, your daughter is the closest thing they have to the light of love they remember so dimly, yet so strongly. And her light is so bright to them, it's a distraction from the true light that has actually come for them—yes, I witnessed it once, in my journeys to that place. The fight that is the door to final rest for them. They are unaware of it, though; it has been kept hidden from them. And now they are distracted, as well. Do you understand me? These souls—who are for whatever reason not at rest—are also not aware they have passed on."

"Do you know the reason they're not at rest?" Steve asked hoarsely. His thoughts were bleak with hindsight: visions of cemeteries moved, bodies uprooted. To make way for his house. His was the first.

"The reason is not important." Tangina dismissed his question. It was irrelevant to what must be done.

Steve's reply was almost inaudible. "I think I know."

Tangina remained unconcerned with the why. "It is not important. What is important is the *fact* of these souls. They are not part of consciousness, as we know it. They linger in a perpetual dream state . . . a nightmare from which they cannot awaken. They live in the dream . . . they *are* the dream. Some people, some of us here—I, for one; your daughter, for another—can see them in *our* dreams. The dreams in which these souls exist are seen by some of us . . . as dreams. Your daughter and I, we were having the same dreams—and now she is lost in it, and we must get her back out."

"Yes, yes, please . . ."

"So." Tangina held up her hand for silence. "Inside this spectral light, this light which has been obfuscated for these wretched dream-wanderers, inside this light is salvation—a window to the next plane. There are other windows, in and out, to other planes, and these windows can admit all manner of creature, bright and dark—"

"We saw some of them last night," Ryan interjected excitedly. He was enthralled by this—a coherent explanation of a totally hallucinogenic, but somehow natural, reality. It simply took his breath.

Tangina nodded gravely. "Fantabel and Sceädu emerged into our earthly plane, I have been told. They inhabit their own worlds, and venture sometimes to the spirit-world of wandering souls. But they should not have come to our dimension. It was a danger to them and

to us, and I have no doubt they were goaded on by one I will speak of shortly. Windows such as these are not to be crossed lightly. The spectral light is such a window. This membrane must be crossed by the lost souls—on its other side, friends will guide them to their destinies. Carol Anne can help them to find this light. If she goes to the light, they will follow her."

"No . . ."

"No, she mustn't go in herself. But that is for you to tell her, Diane. She listened to me for a moment, an hour—but only the love that binds the two of you can hold her exactly where she must be. Where, and when."

"I'll do whatever you ask."

"Well, hold on, dear people, there's one thing more. A terrible presence is in there with her. So much rage . . . so much betrayal . . . I've rarely sensed anything like it. It was strong enough to punch a hole into this world, and take your daughter from you. It keeps Carol Anne very close to it, and away from the spectral light. It uses her to restrain and distract the others, and to draw them away from the light, so they cannot escape his domain. It uses her, and lies to her. It says things only a child can understand. She fears it, but she fears to wander too far from it, for it's the only one who can speak to her, and who knows her secret language. It is the Beast. It sought her from the very beginning." Tangina cupped Diane's face in her hands and brought it close to her own. "Let's get on our feet and go get your daughter."

Diane laughed with tears, and rose. Tangina likewise started to rise, then looked down. "Oh! I *am* on my feet."

It was well after midnight before they'd collected all the things Tangina had instructed them to collect. She stood in the center of the living room floor, now, inventorying the lot.

"Towels, red ribbons, lipstick, numbered tennis balls . . . where's the rope?"

Steve came trudging in with several pounds of rope strung over his shoulder. "It's all I could find."

The television sets were all on to snow. Long lengths of string were taped to the walls, then tied to shorter crosspieces in the middle of the room to form a suspended square of string around the area from which all the artifacts had been materializing.

Tangina looked up at Steve. "It'll do. How's the bath water?"

"Tub's full. I just shut it off."

"Then we might as well get started." She winked at Dr. Lesh. "My equipment just has fewer moving parts than yours, that's all." Then, to Diane: "All right, child. Call your daughter."

Diane walked to the middle of the room and stood there as if waiting to audition. Tangina nodded her on. Diane took a deep breath. "Carol Anne . . . Carol Anne . . . it's Mommy. Can you hear me, baby?"

Static. Blue-white light, and the hollow hiss of electrons.

"Carol Anne. Can you tell Mommy hello?"

Nothing. The air felt dense with vacuum. Diane wanted to crawl out of her skin, or scream. Tangina closed her eyes, began breathing rapidly. Her eyelids fluttered. From far away, she spoke to Diane.

"Try again."

Diane clenched her fists. "Can you say hello to Daddy, baby? Daddy and I miss you so much. So much. We love you so much. Can you say hello?"

Tangina began sweating. Slowly, she shook her head. "She's under restraint!"

Steve and Diane jumped as if stung by the same prod. "What do you mean?" yelled Diane.

"Who's restraining her? Tell us what's going on!"

Tangina opened her eyes, her face flushed, her lips parched. "There are many arms around her; she thinks it's safe. Quickly! Who is she more afraid of? You or your husband?"

Diane shook her head wildly. "She's afraid of neither." She almost burst out crying, terrified that this was the wrong answer.

"Which of you does she answer to first?" Tangina pressed sternly.

"She's always gone to Diane," said Steve. He rubbed his hands on his pants, trying to wipe off the fear.

"When she's naughty, who does she hide from?"

"She's a well-behaved child," Steve protested indignantly. "We've raised her with manners and . . ."

"Look, I'm not from the welfare service; I need a quick answer!"

"Steve decides the punishment," came Diane's reply. "The children have always known that . . ."

"Now wait a minute, Diane, I don't think that's fair exactly. I've never laid a hand on . . ."

Tangina waved them quiet impatiently. "Fight about it later! Right now come stand beside me!" It was an urgent whisper.

Steve obeyed instantly.

Dr. Lesh watched in utter amazement—she'd never seen anything like this before. Ryan, too, could barely keep his eyes on the instruments.

Tangina ordered Steve: "Tell Carol Anne to answer!"

Steve looked around, uncertain where to address his statements.

"Tell her!" barked Tangina.

Steve spoke softly, almost politely. "Honey, it's Daddy. Can you hear me, sweetheart?"

"I said call her. Loud!"

"Carol Anne." Steve talked in his normal speaking voice now. "Carol Anne, it's Daddy."

"Again," muttered Tangina. Her eyelids were drooping once more, her expression glazing over.

"It's Daddy, sweetheart. Answer me."

"Be cross with her," Tangina said.

"Why?"

"Be angry with her, or you'll never see her again!" the psychic commanded.

Steve spoke more harshly now, aroused, upset. "Carol Anne, this is your father speaking."

"Tell her if she doesn't answer she's, in big trouble."

"Answer me right now, young lady, or you're in real hot water!"

"Tell her she'll get spanked."

Steve lowered his voice confidentially. "We never spank the children."

Diane screamed in frustration. "Goddamit, Steven, tell her!"

Steve twisted up his mouth. "If you don't answer your parents this instant, you're going to get a real spanking! From both of us!"

"Swear. Swear!" rasped Tangina.

"Dammit, Carol Anne! Do you hear me!?"

From far away, a voice: "Mommy! Mommy, help me!"

Tangina's respirations were fast and hard, now. Perspiration beaded her forehead, but she smiled grimly. "She's away from him!"

"Away from who?" begged Diane. "That thing we saw? Did that thing have my baby!? Is she all right?"

Tangina ignored the question. Her eyes were closed, and she puffed like a sprinter. "Diane. Ask her if she sees a light."

"Carol Anne! Do you see a light?"

The small voice in the television grew louder. “Mommy! He’s chasing me!” The edge of terror cut the air. “Mommy!” the voice screamed.

“Tell her to run to the light!” Tangina ordered urgently.

Diane looked fearfully at Dr. Lesh. “No!”

Tangina’s hair was down, now; she was panting laboriously. “He will follow her to it. He’s been following her for weeks. They will all follow her. You must tell her what I say!”

Lesh was totally wrapped up in the scene, and trusted Tangina implicitly by this time. “Tell her. Go ahead, Diane, tell her as Tangina says.”

The cry burst from her like gas under pressure. “Run, Carol Anne, run! Run for the light! Run as fast as you can!”

“Mommy! Where are you?”

“I’m here, baby; I’m here!” Diane’s nose and eyes were running; her voice was thick.

“Tell her you’re in the light!” Tangina was getting hoarse.

“No, that’s a lie!” Diane choked.

“You can’t choose between life and death when we’re dealing with what is in between!” Tangina barked. “Tell her, before it’s too late!!”

“Run to the light, Carol Anne!” Diane screamed. “Mommy is in the light! I’m here in the light, baby; come to me!”

“Tell her again. Hurry. Tell her you’re waiting for her.”

Diane was almost strangling on sobs of impotence, frustration, anger, deceit. “Mommy is in the light waiting for you, baby! Please, come to Mommy!” She cried and cried, then wheeled harshly on Tangina and whispered savagely: “I hate you for this!”

Tangina winced, but didn’t reply. Instead, she spoke to the group. “Quick, upstairs, everyone! And bring everything.”

The five of them raced up the steps to the second-floor landing. Everyone crowded around the door to the kids’ room. Tangina turned to them, her breathing hoarse.

“Clear your minds. It knows what scares you. It has from the beginning. Don’t give it any help. It knows too much already. Now . . . open the door.”

Without hesitation, Steve put the key in the lock and turned it. The door swung open easily. Inside, it was like a storm at sea.

A wall of wind and sound blasted through the door—the sounds of moaning and raving, a cacophony of madness and nonsense. The wind, a living blizzard. It made the whole house reverberate.

Tangina crawled in against the gale—but it was not only a storm of wind and tormented noise she braved. Light, too, poured from the room.

Once inside, she was able to stand, for the wind was slightly less violent than it had been directly in front of the door. Even so, she had to squint against the swirling dust and particulate matter . . . and against the light.

The light emanated from the closet—so bright, it was impossible to look into, brighter than the sun, than ten suns exploding. Blue-yellow shards of light stabbed at her face, burned her skin, spilled into the thick atmosphere of the room.

She screamed out into the hall: "Ryan! Get downstairs! Wait by the target!" He couldn't hear her at first, over the din. She yelled louder—her voice was beginning to give out—and he ran downstairs.

Steve crawled into the room next, and stood beside Tangina. Even standing two feet away, she had to yell to be heard. "Steven! Give me the tennis ball marked number one! Diane! Stay in the hall and relay messages to Ryan! Tell him to stand under the circle of string!"

Diane shouted the message downstairs. Ryan shouted up that he was in position. Lesh remained with Diane.

Tangina closed her eyes and tossed the tennis ball into the furnace light of the closet. The raging wind bellowed, and tried to hurl her to the floor. She held onto Steve's arm.

"Ask Ryan if he sees anything!" shouted Tangina. Diane relayed the question.

"Nothing!" Ryan yelled back.

Tangina put her mouth to Steve's ear. "Throw number two into the closet as hard as you can!"

Steve crawled as close to the closet as he dared, aimed into the light through closed eyes, and sent his meanest fast-ball zinging into the hole.

Downstairs, Ryan sat staring intensely at the hanging circle of string. Suddenly there was a popping flash of light, and a tennis ball hit him on the head. He picked it up off the floor and examined it. Number two.

"Tennis ball number two!" he shouted. "Came right out of the fuckin' air!"

Diane shouted the news into the blizzard. Tangina indicated to Steve to repeat the performance with number three, which he did, with all his strength.

A moment later, tennis ball number three fell out of another mid-air

flash, and Ryan called up the information.

Diane screamed it into the bedroom: “Three came back! Number Three is back, too!”

Tangina grinned, tight lipped, into the typhoon. “Now! Tie the red ribbon at the center of the rope! Hurry!”

Frantically, Steve began performing his instructed task. Once again Tangina closed her eyes. She hyperventilated, became rigid, slumped to the floor, left her body.

She had discovered a new way back after her struggle with gHalâ. Quite by accident. He’d expelled her violently, and she’d floated very briefly in inky isolation, and then suddenly dropped with a warm wind through an unseen window . . . into her body. Many ways in, and many ways out, for those with sight.

She found the way quickly, now—it was an oscillating membrane of gill-like flaps—and entered directly into the void she sought. Black, first, becoming black-red. That was disturbing. It had never been anything but black or clear before.

Gradually, all around her was red light. Apparitions floated by in the deathly quiet: old men, children, weeping dreamers, weeping dreams. Tangina hovered below the stream, sensing her way, avoiding the smell of gHalâ, seeking the light. She peered between the mists, around corners created by warps in the ether, inside tunnels tracking to other planes . . . there. She saw it. Under a distortion in the void, a buckling of the ether-substance that formed a well, so it was almost impossible to see unless you were right on top of it. The light.

Phantoms maundered in the middle distance. Tangina hovered nearer the light. There. She saw her standing, quivering, near the mouth of the spectral opening: the girl. She was beginning to stray into the well.

With a terrible jolt, Tangina shot back through the membranous gill-slits—and wrenched her self back to herself. Into the storming bedroom again. At the moment of recorporation, the wind rolled her body across the floor, toward the closet. Steve reached out and grabbed her at the last second, just before she was sucked into the blinding closet door.

Tangina shouted at the top of her voice. “The girl is just at the mouth of the corridor! Tell her to stop! Tell her not to move into the light!”

“Carol Anne!” screamed Diane. “Listen to me. Do not go into the light! Stop where you are. Turn away from it! Don’t look at it!”

Tangina sat up. “Where is the rope?” she yelled.

Steve handed it to her, but she only shook her head. “I’m not strong enough! You’ll have to do it!”

“Do what?”

“Throw one end into the light! Throw it in hard! It has to make it through!”

Steve nodded understanding, though certainly not with any degree of comprehension. He took one end of the rope, coiled it into a knot at the end to give it some weight, pulled a few yards of at up behind him to give himself some slack, and stepped up against the blasting light of the closet door. With both hands, he heaved the knot into the pit, utilizing every muscle he could muster.

An instant later there was a flash in the living room, and the end of the rope dropped into Ryan’s hands. “Got it!” he yelled.

Tangina clenched her teeth. With Steve at her back, she paid out the rope into the closet until the red ribbon was just at the door.

“Tell him to take up the slack downstairs. Tell him to pull gently and yell when he sees the ribbon.”

As this message was relayed from Steve to Diane to Ryan, Tangina took the lipstick, and began marking off inches on the rope, starting with the red ribbon tied to its midpoint. In a minute, Ryan started pulling. When Tangina felt the rope go taut at her end, she methodically fed it into the closet, one inch at a time. First the ribbon disappeared, then mark after red mark, into the vibrant light.

It wasn’t long before they could hear Ryan’s excited call, above the booming wind. “It’s through! It’s through! I see the flag!”

Instantly Tangina stopped feeding rope into the pit. She squinted at the last lipstick calibration peeking around the door jamb. “Only thirty-six inches wide. Not much room in there. Diane! Dr. Lesh! Come in here!”

The two rattled women entered the room on hands and knees, then stood.

“Martha! May I call you Martha? I want you to go downstairs and take the rope with Ryan. I want you to pull with him, when I say, as hard and fast as you can. But only when I say!”

Martha ran out without another word, ran downstairs to join Ryan.

Tangina looked grimly at Diane. “My dear—you must enter the closet!”

A look of raw horror paled Diane’s face in the wash of the yellow-blue light.

“You must do this!” Tangina went on. “She will only come to you!

This is your test! But you must do it right now! We'll tie the rope around you!"

An especially violent gust of wind centered directly on Diane, ramming her into the wall. Steve began tying the rope around his own waist, but Tangina stopped him. "This is for her to do! Besides, I need you to hold the rope!"

Diane crawled back to them, a little dazed, but unhurt. She took the rope and wrapped it around her waist. Steve tied it in place with two clove hitches. They faced each other in the blazing storm.

"I love you!" screamed Diane.

"I love you!" Steve roared.

They kissed, the wind roiling all about. Then Steve took the end of the rope.

Diane moved toward the closet, threw a last look over her shoulder. "Don't let go, you guys!"

"Never!"

In the next second, the light swallowed her up.

Tangina helped Steve feed in more rope until the calibrations passed the eighteen-inch mark, indicating that Diane was just at the center of the infinite void.

Downstairs, Lesh and Ryan took up the foot-and-a-half more slack that rolled out, then stood there, holding the rope taut, tensely waiting, almost afraid to breathe.

Likewise, Steve stood, legs set. Tangina yelled to him. "I'm going to join them now—to send my spirit—to guide them! There is still great danger! Timing is of the essence! Do nothing unless I tell you! Do not try to help me! Don't even listen to me unless I address you! Do you understand?"

"How will I know when Diane's got her?"

"I will know."

Tangina lay down on the floor. Her breathing became irregular; she began to perspire. The wind howled like a wounded beast.

Tangina stiffened, convulsed, lay still. In her mind, all sound and light melted away. Across the filmy diaphragm, into the limbo place.

Into the void. A dull red glow permeated this zone of nothing. All the lost souls ranged about. Beyond them, the brilliant, burning light. Beside the light, Tangina could see Diane, the rope around her waist, going nowhere, coming from nowhere. Standing alone in the silent, directionless wind.

Wraiths floated by, without time or purpose. Some passed near

Diane; none took any notice. Some wept, some smiled, many had no expression, some bled. A few ran, fumbling, distracted. One, not far from the light, was Carol Anne.

And not far from Carol Anne, the shadow of the Beast darkened the mist.

Tangina fought to keep focused, to maintain harmony within her self, to stay centered, in balance. Boldly, she called out. “Cross over, children. You are all welcome. All welcome. Go into the light. There is peace in the light.”

Nothing happened initially. Tangina repeated her directive several times. Then, slowly, the atmosphere seemed to shimmer, like ripples on a pond. Like ripples on a pond, the vagrant apparitions began to order their movement—subtly, at first, almost imperceptibly, then unmistakably: they drifted toward Carol Anne. Toward Carol Anne, and the light.

“Cross over, children.” Tangina’s thought took on power. “Enter the light.”

Carol Anne, among the many, felt the pull, let her tired spirit accept the gentle tugging of the luminescent well behind her.

But then a somber dimness descended, an obscure anger. It was the Beast, beginning to rage.

It saw its minions disappearing into the light, and loosed a grisly scream into the silence. The noise alone was enough to scatter hundreds of the pitiable shapes. Others, the Beast assaulted, threw back, tore into wispy fragments.

Still, some continued to seep into the light—and these the Beast didn’t stop, for it feared the light too much itself to go very close. In its wild spasms from one ghost to the next, it momentarily lost track of Carol Anne. With a silent gasp, Diane saw her child approaching the light—to reach it, Carol Anne would pass within a few feet of where Diane stood. Desperately, the anguished woman extended her arms.

“Cross over, children,” Tangina’s message resounded. The confused spirits regrouped, pressed in again. Again the Beast screamed its ghoulish scream.

Then it saw Tangina, hovering above the light now. The Beast foamed and hissed and railed. It approached her, but she was so near the light, it paused, held its clawed hand before its eyes, stepped carefully closer. He hated the light, but crazed violence made him bold.

He approached: Tangina above the light, Diane beside it, Carol

Anne floating in a daze like a mote of dust passing through the dense beam's cone. And the others all around, masses of weeping spectres, dancing in the light, crossing in front of each other, rushing, floating . . . Diane stretching her hands out, straining . . .

"Cross over, children!" Tangina's call pealed like chimes. "All are welcome! Go into the light! There is peace in the light!"

The Waiting Woman floated by, surrounded by her attendant throng. She paused, directly above the spectral flare.

Tangina called to her. "The light! There is the light! You can go. That is the way. Be free. You can escape. Your Intended rests on the other side. You can rest with him there, forever. You can go!"

The spirit-woman almost smiled, almost paused a little longer. But she moved on. "I can stay," she whispered. "I will wait."

Other souls found an end to waiting, though. They stumbled, drifted, or rushed into the glowing mouth.

The Beast could contain himself no more. Much as he hated the light, he hated more the idea of losing the spirits he controlled to its radiance, and hated still more this shouting presence who lured them.

With an inarticulate noise that nearly tore apart the very stuff of the ether, he threw himself at Tangina's resounding form, gnashing his fangs, biting himself in demented fury.

Hovering above the luminous corridor, Tangina closed her eyes, leaned forward, and changed into a mirror. The intense brilliance reflected off her face and exploded full into gHalâ's eyes, blinding him. He rolled, flailing, into a collection of milling spirits, scattering them violently in a dozen different directions, and tumbled himself off into the nether mists.

"Cross over, children!" Tangina roared, again in her own form—roared defiantly. "Go into the light! There is peace in the light!"

Carol Anne came closer still, nearer the spectral window. She was only feet from Diane, now, and feet from the lip of the well.

"Here I am, baby!" Diane wailed. "Come to Mommy!" Carol Anne's attention flickered. Dazedly, she kept moving.

"Go into the light!" Tangina cried. Scores of spirits converged on the source. Some knocked into the little girl, rushing ahead of her. "There is peace in the light!"

In the howl of the storming bedroom, Tangina's words rang out to Steve: *Go into the light!*

To Steve, this was mad betrayal. "No!" he shouted to her small, prostrate body. "You said no! You said to stay out of the light!"

In his terror and frustration and waiting, he thought he'd missed a beat—he suddenly envisioned Tangina leading his wife and daughter *into* the dreaded light . . . and beyond. Betrayed and lost!

A strangled moan poured from his lips; he began pulling on the near-to-snapping rope. "Diane! Carol Anne!" His scream carried above the noise of the crashing storm; it carried downstairs to the tense duo on the other end of the rope, who looked at each other in confusion. And it carried deep into Tangina's trance, and tore her painfully back into the room. She saw Steve pulling on the rope. She screamed.

"Steven, not yet! Ryan! Pull! Ryan, pull!"

Steve kept tugging. Suddenly a flash of electrical energy exploded from the closet, dying quickly to a low rumbling growl. The growl hit the lower registers of audible sound, then grew in intensity until the room, the entire building, was shaking at its foundations.

At that moment, Steve looked up to see the face of the Beast forging slowly from the closet light.

Like a simian skull, it had huge hollow eye sockets, a protruding mandible, savage fangs. Tense, stringy muscle gave it a hideous snarl. Maniacally, it salivated. A proto-human face, yet its canine teeth were almost tusklike, its nose hole fell into raw bone.

The face filled the entire length and width of the closet door. Viciously, it opened its depraved jaws. Wretched, debased sounds blew the boards off the window, filled the room with vile gas.

The head began to emerge.

Steve froze. Doggedly, through his terror, against all reason, he held onto the rope. Held tightly—like a final act of will.

With everything they had, Ryan and Martha pulled.

Dozens of electrical discharges blossomed in the air above them as they tugged. Suddenly a primal cry, a cry of birth, rang out in the living room. A whirlpool of light arose at the bilocation point, a spinning vortex with glowing membraneous center—and suddenly Diane appeared at the pit of the maelstrom, with Carol Anne in her arms. The central membrane bulged, as from imminent embryonic eruption . . . when all at once the two figures burst through, clattering to the floor with an expulsion of gelatinous, amniotic fluid, and a shower of sparks. The swirling light vanished.

The two were covered with the pinkish, jellied ooze from head to foot. Ryan untied the rope around Diane's waist, as Steve ran downstairs to join them. Tangina followed, weakly.

They were all crying. For a long moment they embraced passionately; then Steve picked up Diane and Carol Anne, and carried

them into the bathroom. Gently, he lowered them into the tub of warm water Tangina had had him prepare earlier—so much earlier, a lifetime ago.

The water foamed and bubbled, turned bright red, gave off an acrid odor as the jelly substance dissolved off the two. They were all still crying. Ryan ran out to get his portable video equipment, to try to tape the stuff. Martha and Tangina stood in the doorway supporting each other.

“Hi, Daddy!” said Carol Anne. She’d just had a long, bad dream she would tell him about later.

“Thank God,” whispered Diane through her tears. “Oh, thank God.” Her hair was salted gray.

The three of them continued hugging in the tub.

Tangina leaned, exhausted, against the bathroom door. Now she, too, could rest. “This house is clean,” she murmured.

Lesh found it difficult to speak. “How . . . how do you know?”

“The child was the connection—as long as she remained in that astral plane, the doorway between the two worlds was kept open. Bodies could move in and out at will, where before only spirits could maneuver. She’s back, now, though, and the hole is closed. The Beast won’t come back for more, I assure you. He lost more than he ever gained by the communication he created between the two worlds—he may even have lost his sight. No, he’s gone from here, and won’t be back.” She sighed a huge sigh of weary relief—for it meant her own ordeal was over, too. “This house is clean.”

CHAPTER 9

The Freelings decided to move.

Steve worked out a deal with Teague—not the best deal for Steve, considering what a good salesman he was, but Steve wanted to move quickly, and was willing to sacrifice.

Tangina went on an extended trip. She needed a long recuperation; she was finished with being studied. Her dreams, in any case, had ended, so she was content to live the life of the mindless—blind, deaf, and ordinary.

Dr. Lesh went back to the university.

Dr. Anthony Farrow, eyes twinkling, sat behind his old, oaken desk. It was piled high with journals, monographs, letters; the paraphernalia of half a century of scholarship. Opposite him sat Martha Lesh, elbow on the arm of the chair, chin in her hand.

"So that's it," she said into her palm. "The saga of Cuesta Verde Estates. So what am I supposed to do with it?"

Dr. Farrow raised his eyebrows hopefully. "Have you thought of selling it to the movies?"

"Tony!"

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry. Just a thought. You know, it's going to be impossible to get anyone in the scientific community to believe you for a moment."

"Except Ryan, anyway," Martha glumly retorted.

"Yes, except Ryan. And me. I believe you."

"You. They don't even let you out of your cloister here, anymore, except to attend honorary dinners."

He laughed. There was a comfortable silence as they both reflected. "The family," he said. "They're all right now?"

"Yes, thank God. A little the worse for wear—but a high-velocity emotional experience like that always brings people much closer together, if it doesn't tear them apart."

He nodded, looked serious. "*You're* a sage woman, Martha. What do you think happened?"

" 'There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are

dreamt of in your philosophy.' Or something like that."

"And how do you know what I dream of in my philosophy?"

"Maybe this *was* a dream. How's this for an explanation: Tangina was chronically sleep and dream deprived for weeks, because of nightmares which kept waking her. Now, you know when that happens to people, their dream-states break through into their waking life—they nod off for a second or two of intense REM activity, then wake up to continue whatever they were doing. Well, maybe Tangina's waking-dream activity was so intense, so strongly telepathic, she projected it into all our minds--starting with the little girl, and then eventually all of us concerned. So it was all Tangina's dream, so intensely experienced and projected we all thought it was real."

Dr. Farrow bobbed his head as he considered it. "Not bad, not bad. I like it actually. It has some flaws, though. What about the jewelry, for example?"

"The jewelry." Martha nodded. "The jewelry is problematic."

"Well," he ventured, "what is jewelry but matter, and what is matter but a special case of energy, and these phenomena you've described are certainly nothing more nor less than very special cases of energy, manifesting themselves in very special ways. Who can say what the source of the energy is? Not me. My brain is too atrophied to do anything but muse anymore. There are energy sources everywhere, though. Energy from our minds? Certainly. Energy from extraterrestrial beings? I couldn't say impossible. From rents in the fabric of space and time? Black holes? Exploding suns, other dimensions, alternate universes? Yes, yes, yes. All, possible. And very likely something related to one of those generalizations was the cause of the Freeling Fantasy Mystery."

"How about spirits of the dead?"

Dr. Farrow put his palm down firmly on the desk. "No. At spirits I put my foot down."

"That's your hand."

"Rather would I subscribe to your silly solipsism—and say the jewelry and *all* of you are inventions of my mind—than postulate spirits." He was adamant.

"Ah, yes, I almost forgot—we *are* scientists, after all."

He pounded his fist gently in mock emphasis of her dictum. His look turned quixotic then. "By the way . . . what *did* happen to all the jewelry?"

Martha lifted her shoulders. "She Who Waits asked us to give it

back—but what was I to do? Send it parcel post, certified? I tried leaving it with the Freelings, but they wanted nothing to do with it—too many bad associations. They told me to study it—their donation to Science. It's in the lab now. We'll make some routine analyses, and get some answers, I expect. I don't know, maybe we should use it to start a museum of paranormal artifacts." She smiled wryly. "Perhaps the spirits of the dead will someday return to claim their necklaces and rings. For now, thank God, it's over, though. Whatever it was, it's come and gone."

Dr. Farrow made his eyes wide, and whispered: "Like a poltergeist."

Bekins boxes filled the living room, stacked in clusters all around. Half the furniture was packed and crated, the other half tagged and numbered. Curtains were down, books and papers were strewn everywhere, awaiting cataloguing. Moving day was dead ahead.

The Freeling family sat around the dining room table as Diane entered from the kitchen carrying a succulent roast on a platter. This was to be the last supper in this house.

E. Buzz sat patiently beside Robbie, knowing the treats he'd get if he behaved long enough. Diane sat down, and everyone bowed their heads. "Bless us oh Lord for these Thy gifts which we are about to receive . . ."

"And for bringing serenity back to our home," Steve added.

At which Robbie chimed in, "Rub-a-dub-dub, Thanks for the grub. Yay, God."

They all laughed, and food was passed. Steve carved the roast. Diane got her purse off the coffee table, reached into it, and extracted an envelope addressed to the entire family.

"This came in the mail today. It's from Tangina—she's in Acapulco."

She passed around a Polaroid of Tangina standing on a sunny beach beside a handsome young beach boy, nearly twice her height.

"Who's that with Aunt Tangie?" Carol Anne wanted to know.

Diane read the accompanying letter out loud: "This photograph just goes on to prove that they do grow things bigger south of the border . . ."

The others dug in eating as she read. Robbie and Dana exchanged a quick series of three punches over the last roll—no knockouts, the fight was called by the ref (Steve). Carol Anne surreptitiously dipped a fingerful of butter to E. Buzz under the table, during the main event.

Diane's voice trailed off, then picked up again. "She wants to know how our therapy is coming, and says there is no better road to a

normal life than through the love we have shown for each other . . .”

“You call this a normal life?” Dana wrinkled her nose.

“You look like a hog when you do that,” Robbie attested.

“Well, you *are* a hog.”

“. . . and she thinks moving is a good idea even if the house is clean,” Diane continued as if she’d been uninterrupted. “You’re still seeing Teague tonight, aren’t you? About arranging a second for us?”

“Yeah, he’s coming by after dinner. We’ll probably go to the club to set it up.”

“Well, I’m going to the Roxy with Kirk and Franklin, so don’t expect me back until late,” Dana announced.

“I don’t expect you back at all,” Robbie commented, making a monster face.

“Creep.”

“It’s a school night, young lady.”

“It is not, Mother; it’s a Friday.”

Diane frowned, then laughed. “Right. Right. I guess your mother is getting old.”

“Just her hair,” razzed Steve.

“Well, I like it,” Diane protested.

“I can lend you some of my Grecian Formula . . .”

“I *like* my hair like this—it’s very distinguished.”

“I think it ought to be *ex*tinguished,” muttered Dana.

“That’s what *you* oughtta be, hog.”

This started round two, which the referee also had to call.

“I thought *all* old people had gray hair,” piped up Carol Anne.

“That reminds me,” Diane laughed, “speaking of forgetting things. We got a call from Dr. Bremer’s office today . . .”

“Who?” cut in Steve.

“Dr. Bremer, the ‘sleep disorder specialist’ I took Carol Anne to see last week. They said we missed the second appointment we’d set up, and didn’t call to cancel, so they’re charging us anyway, but they’re willing to give us one more chance.” She started laughing and couldn’t stop, and then Steve cracked up as well, and the two of them were a pair.

Dana just rolled her eyes. Parents, it seemed, were inexplicable.

“Mom, Carol Anne gots more sweet potatoes on her plate,” Robbie noted after Mom and Dad had finished being silly.

“You can have seconds. Finish firsts first.” Diane wiped a residual tear of laughter from her eye.

Carol Anne pointed at Robbie’s plate, singing, giggling. “Looky-loo. Looky-loo, lookylooky looky-loo . . .”

And of course, Robbie rose to the challenge. “Looky-loo to you too too, looky-loo are you, too, looky-loo, looky-loo . . .”

Dana shook her head and pushed her chair back. “I’m outta here . . .”

She trotted upstairs to get ready for her double date.

Steve and Diane stared at each other with monumental love, then leaned across the table and kissed.

Robbie snuck a piece of fat to E. Buzz under the table, while Carol Anne squeezed some sweet potato in her fist, just to see how it felt.

Diane watched Steve through the living room window as he got into Teague’s Bronco and drove off. She put the dishes into the dishwasher, finished packing a few more items, paused, sighed. Smiled. Time for some gratuitous self-indulgence.

She walked upstairs, pulling the pins from her hair. Crossing the hall to her room, she stopped a moment beside Robbie’s and Carol Anne’s room. The door was closed; warm light filtered out from the crack at the bottom jamb. Quietly, she put her ear to the door: children’s giggled games filtered through—secret high-level conferences with imaginary friends and magical stuffed animals. Diane smiled contentedly, took her hand off the knob, and continued on down to her own room.

It was pretty bare. Only the bed and dressing table remained up; everything else was boxed in the corner. The sheets were new. The television was gone. The stain on the wall had completely disappeared.

She entered the master bathroom, stoppered the tub, began running in a mix of hot and cold water. Steamy hot, to soothe her aching muscles.

She took off her shirt, draped it over the mirror, kicked off her Adidas, peeled off her sweat socks, unzipped and slipped out of her Levi’s. She put on a big terry-cloth robe. She walked back out into the hall, pinning up her hair.

She crossed the corridor once more, once more put her hand on the children’s room door. It was hard for her, opening this door—it always would be. She was glad they were leaving this place. She could never live here with all these memories.

She turned the knob, and the door opened easily. She peeked her head in, tentative as an intruding mother.

Robbie and Carol Anne sat quietly, playing with a whole batch of brand new toys. They turned briefly to look at their mother, then went back to playing.

“Just checkin’ up. I’ll be in the tub a few minutes. You get the phone?”

“Sure, Mom. Hey, cut it out, Carol Anne, that’s mine!”

“Yeah, but you said I could use it, too.”

“You can’t use it until I’m done with it—*then* you could use it, I said.”

“Play nice, or it’s bedtime right now,” Diane smiled. She turned to go, when she noticed the closet light was off. She reached in with her hand, feeling for the switch . . . fumbled with something a few seconds . . . felt something, and flinched. She pulled her hand . . . and the light went on. Warm, yellow. She let go of the pull cord. Edgy. This closet would always make her edgy. She hoped she didn’t get a *thing* about closets.

She left the kids playing and padded back into her own room. Into the bathroom. She dropped the robe in a pile at her feet and stepped into the steaming tub. Inch by inch, she lowered herself into the luxuriously hot water. All the way up to her neck. She sighed, closed her eyes.

The water began to gurgle into the overflow drain under the spigot. It was an ugly sound . . . what did it remind her of? Unconsciously she made a face. She tossed the washcloth over her foot, and, using her big toe, stuffed the cloth into the drain, clogging it. The annoying sound ceased.

E. Buzz sauntered in and lay down on the bathroom rug. Diane reached her hand out, scratched his head a few times, then retracted her arm to soak again. The dog sighed, curled up, closed his eyes.

Diane closed her eyes. So relaxing . . . she knew she mustn’t let herself fall asleep, but she could let herself get close. Her muscles hummed with pleasure; all her tension was oozing away. Her breathing slowed down, became regular. Her mind drifted off . . .

Robbie grew tired of the game. He yawned, and climbed into his new bed. Carol Anne watched him, yawned like him, and, like her older brother, climbed into her own new bed.

The floor was a field of toy rubble; it looked like the cloth-animal burial ground.

“G’night, Robbie.”

“’Night, Carol Anne.”

Robbie looked over at the new rocking chair resting quietly in the corner. The old clown doll sat there bolt upright—quirkishly, the only remaining plaything left over from . . . before. Everything was divided into before and after, now.

Robbie didn’t like the way the doll looked, just sitting there all smiley and cockeyed, so he wadded up his discarded shirt by the bed and tried tossing it over the clown’s head. He missed. The shirt hit the top of the chair, then tumbled down over the arm rest. The impact started the chair rocking.

Robbie shrugged, and turned out the light by the bed. Only the cloud-shaded moon sifting through the window and a warm yellow shaft from the partially open closet illuminated the room. Outside, far in the distance, the rumble of thunder, more felt than heard.

Carol Anne was already fast asleep. Her man-in-the-moon clock ticked quietly by the bed. Car headlights briefly flashed across the window, then disappeared. Robbie turned to the wall, looking for a comfortable position.

In the corner, the chair kept rocking.

“I sure wish you’d reconsider, Steve. This is a golden opportunity you’re turning down.”

Teague sat with Steve in a quiet booth at the rear of the club bar, nursing a dry martini. A waitress noticed his glass was almost empty, and started toward the table, but when she was halfway across the room, Teague shook his head once, and she veered off to do something else.

“I know it is, Frank, and I appreciate your offer. Really, I do. I just . . . we’re just set on moving, and there’s no second opinion on the subject.”

Teague squinted. “This wouldn’t be your wife’s idea, would it? You know, Steve, sometimes women don’t understand . . .”

“This is something we both agree on, Frank. It’s just, well, the kids have had some bad experiences here, and for their sake mostly, we want to get . . .”

“What is it, someone beat up your son in school? Nothing could be so bad as to throw away a career for it, Freeling. I mean, what’s it all about, anyway? You work, you strive, you do what you have to do. That’s the law of evolution, man—you don’t do that, and you’re just passing on bad genes. Know what I mean?”

“Well, no, not exactly . . .” Steve stared into his beer.

“Look, all I’m saying is, you’re a real model in this community. A pillar. And we’re proud of you, Steve. Why, you moved into the very first house we built here. You were the ground-breaker—and don’t you ever think that’s gone unnoticed . . .”

Steve smiled bitterly into his glass.

“And man,” Teague continued, “you sure can sell that real estate!”

Steve looked around the room. Velour walls, plush carpeting, overstuffed leather cushions, dark lighting. The good life. He wondered whose grave he was drinking over now.

“Like I say, Frank—thanks, but no thanks.”

Teague nodded curtly. He knew when to stop wasting breath on a sale. “Okay, have it your way. As I told you yesterday, the company is willing to buy the place back from you, but with the market the way it is, you’re going to have to carry some paper . . .”

Teague went on talking the specifics of the deal. Steve nodded in the right places, but his mind was elsewhere. He stared out the western wall of the bar—all glass, it overlooked the entire expanse of Cuesta Verde, nestled comfortably in the valley below. The lights of the houses glittered and jumped out of the cool night, like embers on a black velvet robe. He thought he picked out the glint that was his house, but then he shifted in his seat and saw he’d only been looking at a reflection in the plate glass window cast by one of the tiny white bud-lights over the bar. Funny, the way things sometimes seemed.

Diane stood up, out of the tub, onto the rug, and began to dry off. Her dripping woke E. Buzz, who raised his head, perked up his ears. Diane blew him a kiss. He wagged his tail.

She walked into the bedroom, slipped one of Steve’s old huge football T-shirts over her head—it fit her like a potato sack—and sat down at the vanity. E. Buzz lay at her feet. Slowly, she began taking the pins from her hair, letting it down in the mirror.

With her hair down, she looked at herself a moment. Prematurely gray. Lots of new character. Like a seasoned ship battered by unseasonable weather. She felt as if she’d been round the cape on this one. How strange life was—to have given her so much, such comfort, a loving family—and then thrashed it all around in a four-day nightmare . . . and then returned to its normal state of grace. Total order to total disorder in one easy lesson. Like fifty-two card pick-up. How strange.

So. A return to order. She picked up her brush and firmly pulled it

through her hair. One hundred times—now, there was a comforting ritual. Over the scalp, down through the tangles; she almost cried with happiness. One . . . two . . . three . . . four . . .

At fifty, she threw her head forward so all the hair in back came over to cover her face. She hung her head down and continued stroking, starting at the back of the neck, bringing the brush up and forward across her scalp, then down in front of her forehead. Over and over, breaking through the tiny knots, leaving her hair smooth, silky.

Finally satisfied, she flipped her head straight back, so all the hair would fly back around her shoulders. In the mirror, she watched as the shiny gray-brown strands flew straight up into the air, reached their full height . . . and froze there.

Her long hair stood straight up, on end, and didn't come down.

It gave her a horrible, gut-wrenching feeling to see her face in the mirror like that . . . like a creature. Her heart—her mind—jolted.

E. Buzz yelped and ran out of the room. Diane's hair remained up—like spikes. She felt faint. Her eyes began to roll up . . . when suddenly she was seized.

Invisible hands held her arms against her sides. In the mirror, she saw—and felt—four deep impressions collapse her cheek unevenly against her jaw. The left side of her mouth was pressed against her front teeth; her whole head started twisting back, pulled by unseen, malevolent fingers.

She moaned in fear. She tried to rise, could not. Her lips were pressed flat against her gums, now, mushed in violent counterclockwise circles; something foul was kissing her.

All at once her hair fell down around her shoulders, and she toppled back to the floor. Something snagged her ankle, but she struggled free with a burst of wild strength and half ran, half crawled toward the open door.

The door slammed shut.

The noise woke Robbie. He'd been hardly asleep anyway, but now something had jarred him wide awake, and he didn't know what. He looked over at Carol Anne; she was out like a light. He looked out the window, where the tree used to be—only gray-black night, now, chilly and dense. Thunder growled like a waking bear.

He looked at the new clock, the new toys, the new posters. Everything seemed so unfamiliar. Almost threatening. He looked at the new rocking chair. It was empty.

Robbie sat up in bed, suddenly scared. He looked all over for the

clown doll. He even peered over the edge of the bed to the floor. It was nowhere to be seen.

His breathing quickened. The doll had been in the chair, he was certain, and now it wasn't. With a grinding of his teeth, he shifted closer to the edge of the bed. He knew where he had to look.

He rolled over onto his belly and slowly lowered himself, head first, to the floor, readying himself to look under the bed. Delicately, he lifted the dust ruffle; softly, his head touched the rug. Upside down like this, he peered into the darkness under the bed.

The clown was there, smiling sardonically.

Robbie gasped, but before he could move, the doll's arms rapidly elongated, stretched out toward the boy, and began to wrap themselves tightly around his neck. Around and around they wrapped, four times around his neck, cutting off his air.

Then, with the strength of a maniac, the doll dragged him, struggling, under the bed.

Carol Anne jumped awake, unaccountably frightened. She looked over at her brother's bed, but he wasn't there. A breeze rose up, ruffling her hair. She looked, with a premonitory dismay, at the closet.

The closet light was growing brighter.

When the door slammed in her face, Diane turned to run for the window. Before she'd taken two steps, though, something nearly tore her arm out of its socket, and flung her to the floor.

For a moment, she just sat there, panting. Nothing happened. She tried to think. This couldn't be happening. This was a clean house, now, Tangina had said so.

With a shock she was thrown to her back; something sat upon her chest. She tried to squirm free, but couldn't. She started becoming hysterical.

Her T-shirt pulled suddenly all out of shape; hulking finger-impressions sank deeply into her flesh, kneaded and flattened her breasts, lifted her and slammed her to the floor . . .

Then it stopped. She lay on the rug, pasty pale, sweating, hyperventilating. All quiet. Tentatively, she crawled to the door. She reached for the knob.

She was pulled to her feet like a rag doll. Her toes barely touching the floor, she was dragged across the room, onto the bed, against the wall at the head of the bed . . . and up the wall. Dragged up the wall and onto the ceiling.

Her back arched. Her head was yanked forcibly to the side, held invisibly by the hair. The thing dragged her back and forth across the ceiling; periodically it bit her—at least, that's what it felt like. She quickly stopped resisting. She was half unconscious. After a minute of this, she was dragged to the opposite wall, down the wall, and dumped to the floor.

Again, all was quiet. Her legs like water, she pulled herself frantically across the room to the door. She reached, strained, sobbed—and it opened, mercifully opened.

"Robbie! Carol Anne! Get out of here! Run! Run! Run!"

She stumbled from the room, shutting the door behind her. She crawled on her hands and knees toward the children's room.

In the children's room, Robbie and Carol Anne heard Diane's screams. The closet door suddenly slammed shut, as Robbie rolled across the floor, enmeshed in the clown doll's arms. He made it to the hall door, reached up a thrashing hand to the knob, and pulled. The door wouldn't open. Just outside, he could hear his mother halfway down the hall, crawling on the floor and shouting.

Carol Anne sat upright in bed, paralyzed with fear, staring mesmerized at the closet: the dazzling light was pouring out from under the closet door. And now, along the door frame: sinuous, blue veins were starting to grow, pulse, and curl into the edges, around the hinges, over the jamb.

Outside, Diane inched closer to her baby's room—she could hear chaos mounting inside; she could hear one of the children rattling the doorknob, trying to get out. She was almost there.

From beneath the door of Diane's room, a cloud of ectoplasmic smoke rushed snaking down the hall ahead of her, cutting her off from access to Robbie and Carol Anne. She stopped short, emitting a small sound from her throat.

The cloud hovered in front of the bedroom door, forming an eerie blockade. Slowly it began to manifest. Like congealing ether, it took form: the eyeless face, flowing hair, flowing arms, flowing gown—it was the Waiting Woman. She stood there, willowy, insubstantial, floating like a phantom queen above Diane—unseeing, unsmiling, unbeing.

"Help," rasped Diane thickly. "Help me. Please."

The woman seemed to smile briefly—at least, it looked like a smile. The corners of her mouth turned up; her lips stretched thin . . . and then kept stretching. Her entire face began to lengthen out, elongate forward, becoming pulled and slightly distorted in front, the cheeks stretching horribly anterior—six inches, twelve inches, as if there were

a plunger behind her face, pushing it out from an infinitely expansile occiput, farther and farther out, until suddenly . . . the face ruptured open. Burst apart. Revealing, behind it: the great skull head, its eye sockets infinitely black, its pointed teeth venomous, the crater nose, protruding brow: the Beast.

It rose up, arms extending puttylike—the claws that dripped, the hiss that chilled.

Diane pushed herself backward down the hall as the thing reached out for her—got to the top of the landing and began rolling, uncontrolled, down the carpeted steps, just as the thing sent a smoky talon sizzling into the wall where her head had been.

At the bottom of the stairs she grappled for her footing, found it . . . and raced for the back door. She swung it open, hard, running full tilt into the yard. It was pouring rain.

Soaked immediately, she turned around to face the house. Walking backward, looking up at the children's room, she began to scream.

"Steve! Anyone! Help me!"

Before she could continue, she lost her footing in the mud, and slipped into the shallow end of the unfinished swimming pool. From there she immediately slid all the way down the wet mud to the deep puddle at the deep end.

Lightning and thunder ripped the sky. Diane flopped around dizzily, trying to regain her balance in the quagmire. Suddenly a large gushing bubble exploded next to her in the mud. She gaped at it uncomprehendingly as a second bubble burst just a moment later beside the first—in each rose the leathery, rotting head of a corpse, in burial clothes: rising like an animated stalk, out of the gushing bog.

Diane screamed and stepped back. She bumped into something, swiveled around: another cadaverous face, its mouth opening wide, revealing fine wire jaw clamps that sprang and pinged like a violin tuned too tight.

A coffin oozed out of the mud beside her, its hinged lid breaking open, spilling bones and rot and burial jewelry all over Diane.

She knew she must be going mad.

Carol Anne screamed continuously as the rising wind began ceaselessly sucking everything into the closet once again. The growing, white-hot light flooded the room. Memories of the inferno.

On the floor, Robbie wrestled with the clown. Its arms still strangling him, he tore bits of stuffing from its middle, the shredded tufts of cotton flying immediately at terrifying speed into the closet

opening.

And the closet opening was coming alive. Mounds of flesh began to grow all along the door frame, to puff up like undulating visibly growing fungus. Then, as if the door itself were a living, pulsing organism, fatty tissue started to form along the borders of the fleshy frame, veins rivuleted the soft pinkish skin, escaping back down into the maw of the closet until the closet itself was a giant mouth, all gums and lips and blinding light transilluminating the pink-yellow tissues, all the way back to the bottom of the mucoid pit, where a pale, oily esophagus could be seen generating its peristaltic spasms down to its abysmal depths.

Carol Anne just kept screaming.

The backyard was shaking violently with some sort of bizarre, local seismic activity, forcing dead things up from the ground as if they were bubbling out of a thick gruel. Diane was numb, almost babbling, her circuits overloaded. Time and again she tried to climb out of the steep, slick excavation; each time she slipped back into the rain and mire and slurping corpses.

Finally, she made it back to the shallow end, hand over hand like an automaton, and reached up to the level earth to pull herself out. Something grabbed her wrist. It hoisted her into the air. She held her breath.

It was Mr. Tuthill from next door.

"Look at that!" Tuthill yelled, pulling Diane up out of the hole. "Look at that! Look in your pool, my God!"

Mrs. Tuthill ran up, holding an umbrella. "Your children. Listen! What sort of sound is that?"

The screams of Robbie and Carol Anne floated down ethereally from the upstairs window, its unearthly light glaring out into the rainy night.

"I have to get them out!" Diane shouted, and began running toward the house.

Mr. Tuthill began to follow her, but his wife stopped him, shaking her head. "Don't go in there. There's funny things go on in there."

"But those kids . . ." Mr. Tuthill objected.

"Leave it, I tell you," she dourly admonished. "You don't know *what's* goin' on in there. The things I've heard—I'm telling you. Might be junkies, or perverts; they might have a gun, you don't know what. You keep to your own." Subject closed.

The sounds were too horrible to ignore completely, though. "Well. I

don't care, I'm gonna call the police," Mr. Tuthill asserted. He turned with a determined frown, and walked back toward his own house. Mrs. Tuthill caught up with him, holding the umbrella over their heads.

Diane charged up the stairway. The door to the children's room was shut, the ultra-bright light streaming from under the jamb. She opened it . . . and was immediately sucked in.

Inside, the room was like a hurricane. Robbie and Carol Anne were holding onto their bedposts with the strength of terror, their bodies almost horizontal in the wind. Everything else was flying through the air in wild revolutions, then getting sucked one by one into the relentless closet.

"Robbie! Take my hand!"

The boy reached one hand out to Diane, still holding onto his bed with the other. She moved closer, an inch at a time, into the wall of wind that blew against her. With a crash, the chair surrendered to the closet's draw; the beds, too, started moving toward it. Something like saliva began to overflow in the corners of the bright cavernous well.

Diane lurched one more step, and got hold of Robbie's wrist.

"Take your sister's hand, Robbie! Take it!" She held onto her son's hand in the blasting squall with the nearly superhuman strength not unknown to a mother whose children are in mortal danger.

Robbie and Carol Anne reached for each other; their fingers almost touched. The closet let loose a great stridorous inhalation—the beds shot out from under the children and plunged into the pit . . . just as Robbie's and Carol Anne's hands locked, and Diane dragged them both from the room.

She carried and pushed them ahead of her to the staircase. Halfway down, the stairs began rolling, buckling as in an earthquake, knocking the three off balance. They ended up face down on the landing.

Diane's left eyebrow was cut, bleeding. Through a slow-motion haze, she led the kids toward the front door, as a tremendous head wind kept forcing them back. Noise was all around, as if the air itself were screaming.

Just then Teague's Bronco pulled up into the Freeling driveway. Steve and Teague emerged from the car to this apocalyptic vision: the house radiating a powerful light from the upper window, the exterior walls beginning to crack, smoke leaking from the roof, a weird, horrific noise emanating from the building, the ground all around it shaking in continuous tremor. Teague's mouth dropped open. Steve ran to the front steps.

As he approached the door, Diane threw it open from the inside, the children beside her. Before she could step out, though, the cement of the front porch cracked wide, the ground exploded—out shot an ornate casket, amidst a geyser of dirt, splinters, and stones—and the door slammed shut again. Steve covered his head under the shower of debris. Diane backed into the house.

She ran with the children down the hall, toward the kitchen. Just as she entered the eating area, the floor bulged, buckled . . . and split open with a horrific moan. Two more coffins shot up through the shattering tile. Their lids blew off as they erupted, spewing rotten, rotting corpses into the kitchen. One pitched forward onto Diane.

She pulled the children around this impasse, toward the back door. Suddenly the entire back wall burst inward, almost crushing them with rubble—burst inward from the impact of the face of the Beast. Diane ran right past it with the children, through the gaping wall, under the sagging rafters, into the wailing night.

Steve, meanwhile, had begun racing around the side of the house, to try to get in through the back. An explosion of bones, mud, and decaying flesh knocked him off his feet as he rounded the first corner. As he clawed his way out of this pile of necrosis, he looked up to see Teague standing there, unmoving, gawking incredulously.

“You moved the cemetery!” screamed Steve. “But you left the bodies, didn’t you! You son-of-a-bitch, you left the bodies and only moved the headstones!”

Another car pulled up at that moment. Dana got out with two young men. The three of them stood there with mouths agape.

The rain was stopping now, and neighbors were coming out on their porches to see what the commotion was. The commotion was increasing.

All the windows of the Freeling place blew outward at once, blasted with gigantic gusts of light. The house itself began to moan.

Diane and the children came running around the side of the house, toward the driveway. Two more coffins were regurgitated from the earth, blocking their path. Diane sidestepped the cascading bodies and scrambled with her youngsters toward the parked stationwagon.

Steve saw where they were headed, and called to Dana. She jumped in the back seat, as Steve slid in behind the wheel. The others joined them in a moment. Steve started the engine and threw the car into reverse, just as another coffin blasted up in front of them, through the cement of the driveway.

He screeched back, plowing into the tail end of Teague’s Bronco, shoving it into the street. Then he threw the wagon into forward gear

and gunned it, skidding past Teague, who still stood there.

Teague didn't stand there much longer, however. A casket shot up beside him, bursting from the lawn, ripping up electrical wires and cables with it, causing shorts and sparks all around. A decayed cadaver spilled forward on top of him, and together they tumbled into a black, muddy hole.

Three more coffins exploded into Tuthill's VW, knocking it into the street, causing Steve to swerve the stationwagon around it, losing control of the car. He squealed to a halt just in time, as more corpses were expelled from the ground around a fire hydrant, once again blocking his path. He jumped out of the car to clear the way, mud, bones, and water running down on him from the now-gushing hydrant. Behind him an incredible gurgling noise began building to an ear-shattering crescendo. He turned to look. It was his house.

The window of the children's room glowed with an almost radioactive intensity. The entire house began to suck itself inward, the implosion focusing on the children's room—on the all-consuming closet.

Steve stared, motionless, stunned.

A concussion of awesome power blew all the shingles off the roof, as a cloud of thin, blue ectoplasmic vapor reached up like fingers toward the sky, and disappeared. Moments later, the rest of the house was suctioned inward to a point in space fourteen feet above the ground—where the children's closet had been—until it was totally consumed. Empty space, now, where the house had recently existed. Suddenly, all was quiet.

In a daze, Steve got back in his car. Carol Anne and Robbie were still crying hysterically; Diane was trying to comfort them; Dana stared out the back window in utter disbelief.

The street was in chaos. Neighbors were streaming from their houses; cars were careening out of driveways. The police arrived. A gas main was broken, high tension wires sparked dramatically, water spurted thirty feet into the air from the broken hydrant, corpses and coffins and bones and putrefaction lay everywhere.

Only the Freeling lot sat still and dark at the center of the mêlée.

Steven veered his car around the casket blocking his way, drove to the end of the block, and turned the corner. The hysteria inside the car slowly died down as Steve took them farther and farther from the scene of the . . . whatever it was.

The night was clearing. The moon peeped from behind a cloud as the Freeling car passed the last sign, at the outskirts of the city: You are now leaving beautiful Cuesta Verde Estates. Please Drive

Carefully.

The entire family slowly climbed the outside steps to the second-floor room of the Holiday Inn. It was an hour later. They'd just kept driving until they'd quieted down, then stopped at the first place they came to. They were exhausted, but they were together, and it was over.

They entered the room, closed the door.

A minute later, the door opened again. Steve walked out onto the balcony, pushing the big color television on its wheeled stand. With a look of triumphant determination, he gave it a long, send-off shove down along the balcony terrace. Then he turned and reentered his room without looking back. He closed the door behind him.

The television just kept on rolling.

About the Author

JAMES KAHN is a physician specializing in Emergency Room medicine in a Los Angeles hospital. He has written two science fiction novels for Del Rey books—WORLD ENOUGH AND TIME and TIME'S DARK LAUGHTER—as well as the novelizations of POLTERGEIST, RETURN OF THE JEDI, and INDIANA JONES AND THE TEMPLE OF DOOM.